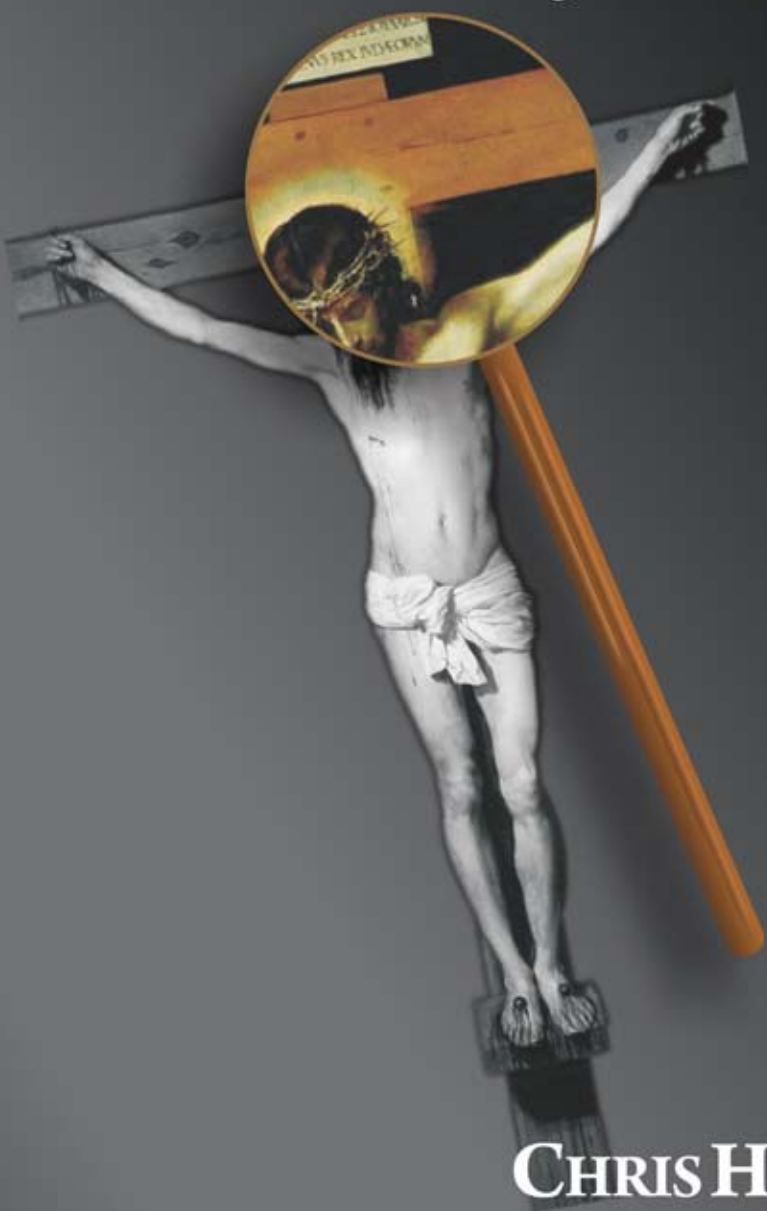


UFOs, Ghosts, and a Rising God

Debunking the Resurrection of Jesus



CHRIS HALLQUIST

UFOs, Ghosts, and a Rising God:

Debunking the
Resurrection of Jesus

Chris Hallquist

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Preface to the Ebook Edition

t was strange re-reading my book more than three years after it was first published. If I rewrote the book today, it would certainly be a very different book. In fact, it might not even be a book. Looking back, I now find it very hard to see the religious apologetics I'm addressing as worthy of a book-length rebuttal, even in a relatively short book like this one.

But however silly the arguments of Christian apologists may seem, the fact is that the evangelical community has put an enormous amount of effort into them, and continued to do so after this book was first published. Notably, in 2010, evangelical scholar Michael Licona published a 700 page book titled *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*.

Unfortunately, it's not clear what was supposed to be new about Licona's approach, since the structure of Licona's argument was taken directly from Licona's predecessors, Gary Habermas and William Lane Craig. In fact, at a key point, when it comes time to rebut the views of Biblical scholar Michael Goulder, Licona relies heavily on simply quoting Craig (and then, in the section on Gerd Lüdemann, Licona refers his readers back to the section on Goulder).

These facts, though, did not stop many evangelicals from seeing the book as an important vindication of their views, and even Bart Ehrman (the author of many excellent books on New Testament scholarship, such as *Misquoting Jesus* and *Jesus, Interrupted*) has mentioned on his blog that he felt obligated to read Licona's book while researching one of his own¹.

So I think it's worth having a book-length rebuttal to the apologists out there, and I really believe this is the most comprehensive

response available. Kris D. Komarnitsky's *Doubting Jesus' Resurrection* comes close, but leaves out a discussion of the basics of New Testament scholarship, which I think is a mistake. In my experience, one of the biggest difficulties in talking with Christians who've been sold on the idea that resurrection is "historically proven" is getting them to realize that they cannot, for example, assume that Jesus' tomb was guarded simply because the Bible says it was. (Though I have to add that that Komarnitsky's book is still excellent, and if this one didn't exist, I would simply tell people looking for a response to the apologists to read Komarnitsky's alongside Ehrman's *Jesus, Interrupted*.)

And when I re-read this book, I was happy to find that, while I might not write it the same way today, I still think almost everything I say in it is correct. There are only two minor exceptions. In chapter 6, I say that Jesus' disciples would be at risk of being executed themselves after Jesus' death. I now realize I have no idea if that's true, and may have been letting myself be influenced too much by apologetic arguments that stress the disciples' (alleged) martyrdoms.

A more serious issue which I'm no longer sure of is this: is understanding the origins of other paranormal claims really that important for seeing the holes in the apologists' arguments? Gary Habermas' arguments do rely on a lot of straightforward mistakes about human psychology, so it helps to know some psychology there, and the psychology of apparitions and alien abduction experiences in particular is certainly relevant. On the other hand, as I explain in chapter 6, many of his mistakes could be avoided with logic and common sense: by keeping straight what he's trying to argue, keeping straight the difference between "some hallucinations" and "all hallucinations," and asking himself what he'd think of similar arguments offered as "proof" of somebody else's religion.

And with William Lane Craig, I've become convinced that the main problem is Craig's dishonesty. I discuss the issue of apologists' dishonesty in the last chapter, but I've come to take an even dimmer view of Craig since writing that chapter. One reason is encountering some of Craig's fans, and being surprised at their ignorance of basic

Biblical scholarship. Surprised, because Craig himself clearly knows what he's talking about; his writings are free of the howlers that mark out the likes of Josh McDowell as simply incompetent.

Unfortunately, close examination of Craig's writings reveal they're also free of much real information about Biblical scholarship. Instead, we get a string of factoids and half-truths which, while not quite howlers, seem to have been carefully selected to give the impression that mainstream Biblical scholarship is much more favorable to Craig than it actually is.

Now I don't want to dwell on Craig's misdeeds, especially since I'll be devoting a chapter to them in my next book, but I do want to emphasize one other thing with Craig: on my view, none of the "facts" he claims as evidence for Jesus' resurrection are really facts in the sense his audience is likely to understand—that is, as things that are *verifiably* true. Even the claim that some of the earliest Christians *believed* they had seen Jesus after his death cannot be verified. The standard apologist's claim that martyrs could not have been liars is refuted by cases such as Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism. Furthermore, the evidence that the apostles were martyred in the first place turns out to be very sketchy².

While the point I've just made is one I alluded to briefly in the original book, I regret not emphasizing it more. Even if the possibility that the apostles lied isn't the most likely possibility, it is still a real possibility, and that alone makes nonsense of the claim (made frequently by Craig and other apologists) that a miracle is the only plausible explanation for the "evidence."

There are a couple of other points where, though I stand by what I wrote, my emphasis may have been a bit off. I still think Carl Sagan was absolutely right to say that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, but it's a slogan that can be misinterpreted and may sound like some kind of trick to many believers. Perhaps I would have been better off emphasizing something I mention only briefly: apologists' failure to ask themselves the question, "would I think my 'evidence' is really credible if it were presented for a belief system other than my

own?”

The other point worth clarifying is that, when I discuss the miracles allegedly performed during Jesus’ life, I am not assuming the general reliability of the gospels. I think it is quite likely that Jesus had a career as a faith healer and exorcist, and am struck by how many of the healings and exorcisms attributed to him could have happened more or less as described without anything supernatural going on. But even the more low-key stories could easily be legends.

Now I’ve decided to try an experiment: I’m giving this book away for free. And I’m giving readers official permission to pass around copies to their friends by licensing it under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License, which you can find online at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>. Basically, this means exactly what I’ve just said: you have my blessing to make copies for your friends or anyone else, except that you can’t sell it and I really prefer that you pass it around as-is rather than remixing it.

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If you’ve read this and benefited from it, consider donating to support my writing. You can find my tip jar at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/hallq/free-ebook/>.

Finally, I’d like to give a huge thank-you to Jeff Cogswell, who was my editor for the original print version of this book and assisted me with putting together the ebook. What you’re reading right now literally would not exist without him.

1. <http://ehrmanblog.org/the-next-project-how-jesus-became-god-for-members/> Accessed 12 November 2012.

2. See Richard Carrier. 2006. Why I Don’t Buy the Resurrection

Story (6th ed.) http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/resurrection/lecture.html Accessed 1 February 2013

3. <http://craphound.com/rotn/download/> Accessed 21 January 2013.

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I am the better pleased with the method of reasoning here delivered, as I think it may serve to confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the Christian Religion, who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason. Our most holy religion is founded on Faith, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure.

--David Hume, "Of Miracles"

Introduction



In May of 2005, 20/20 did a program on the resurrection of Jesus, for which they interviewed a number of scholars and theologians. One of the scholars representing skeptics of the resurrection was Kathleen Corley, a religious studies professor from my home town of Oshkosh. She made only two brief appearances in the course of the program, but when the local paper reported on her appearance the result was a series of angry letters to the editor. Several suggested she ought to have lost her job. There were also many letters to the effect that she could be proven wrong on historical grounds; one letter declared that "the attempts to refute Jesus' resurrection are laughable," while another compared her view to the claims that the moon landings were a hoax.

My current residence of Madison has a strong reputation for liberalism. Residents proudly remember that it was a center of Vietnam War protests on level with Berkeley, California, and New Age book stores line the way to the capitol building. In theory, this should mean a lack of conspicuous fundamentalism. In practice, it means attracting evangelists like flies. We get Bible-college students handing out tracts, old men holding up signs informing us of the fiery fate that awaits us in the hereafter, and people plastering stickers that say "Homosexuality is a sin." In my various encounters with them I've received numerous justifications for their beliefs: the Bible is infallible, the Holy Spirit tells me so, etc. Among the justifications: "There's more evidence for the

resurrection than that Benjamin Franklin ever existed!”

At first blush, these claims look like the ravings of believers at the fringe of American religion. Unfortunately, that isn’t exactly the case.

Welcome to the world of Christian apologetics, or rather one part of it. Technically, the field includes attempts to prove the existence of God (increasingly muddled with attacks on modern biology), as well as attempts to fend off attacks on Christianity. It includes the work of “soft apologists” like Stephen Davies, who merely argue there is enough evidence to make Christianity reasonable.

Front and center in apologetic literature, though, are attempts to prove not just God, but Christianity using evidence. In this genre we have the 1998 book *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel, which has sold over two million copies to date. Josh McDowell, the author of such titles as *The Evidence that Demands a Verdict* and *More than a Carpenter* and in many respects Strobel’s predecessor, has sold over 42 million books since he first started cranking them out in 1972. These aren’t quite *Left Behind* sales figures, but they represent a force in modern religion all the same.

Claims that the resurrection must be accepted on historical grounds stand at the center of these arguments. *The Case for Christ*, for example, has one chapter on alleged Biblical prophecies of Jesus, one arguing that he wasn’t insane (in an incomplete version of C. S. Lewis’ “Liar, Lunatic, or Lord” argument), and four chapters on the resurrection. The latest version of *The Evidence that Demands a Verdict* devotes nine pages to Lewis’ trilemma, 39 pages to prophecy, and 81 to the resurrection. This is even more than is spent on the historical reliability of the New Testament (36 pages), an odd fact considering that the section on the resurrection is based on the assumption that the New Testament accounts are accurate in every detail.

Strobel and McDowell aren’t lone voices crying in the wilderness either. Rather, they are the popularizers of the work of writers such as Norman Geisler, president of the Southern Evangelical Seminary; Gary Habermas, a professor at Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University; and Wil-

liam Lane Craig, who was until recently president of the Evangelical Philosophical Society. These are men who have strived to give scholarly respectability to attempts to prove Christianity.

Recently, these claims have reached an audience outside staunch evangelicals as an odd side-effect of the success of books like Sam Harris' *The End of Faith* and Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. The amount of publicity given these books meant that it suddenly made good business sense for publishers to buy manuscripts from every half-competent writer who thought they had something worthwhile to say about religion. Many of these writers—including no less an authority than Francis Collins, a leader of the Human Genome Project—uncritically repeated the claims of the professional apologists, seemingly unaware that any scholars anywhere might disagree with the apologists' claims.¹

And it is all bunk. It is bunk the way sensationalistic claims of UFO encounters and psychic phenomena are bunk. This is not something I say simply to emphasize how wrong the arguments are, even though there are some stunning instances of arguments premised on wildly, demonstrably false claims. Rather, I bring up UFOs and such for this reason: the claim that the Bible's miracles can be proven on evidence, is extraordinary, but the evidence is no better than for other extraordinary claims. The fallacies employed by proponents of both sets of claims are the same. Also, while apologists have insisted that the evidence for Christianity's miracles can only be explained by real miracles, the mystery disappears when one is familiar with modern claims.

As bunk, the claims need to be debunked. Just as it is useful for the public to have references on urban legends, UFO sightings, and supernatural con artists, it is useful to have some counterweight to evangelical propaganda. Note that the issue of fundamentalism is by no means secondary here. I am in the habit of thinking that bunk ought to be challenged for the simple reason that it is bunk, but here there is also the fact that the authors I will be dealing with are not arguing for miracles to validate Jesus' ethical message. Rather, they are people who believe the Bible when it says, in John Chapter 3, that believers

inherit eternal life and unbelievers are condemned. The force of this belief comes out strongly in Lee Strobel's follow-up work *The Case for Faith*, a book which, in trying to defend the doctrine of hell, quotes one evangelical philosopher as saying:

"What is the most heinous thing a person can do in life? Most people, because they don't think much about God, will say it's harming animals or destroying the environment or hurting another person. And, no question, all of these are horrible. But they pale in light of the worst thing a person can do, which is to mock and dishonor and refuse to love the person that we owe absolutely everything to, which is our Creator, God himself.

*"You have to understand that God is infinitely greater in his goodness, holiness, kindness, and justice than anyone else. To think that a person could go through their whole life constantly ignoring him, constantly mocking him by the way they choose to live without him, saying, 'I couldn't care less about what you put me here to do. I couldn't care less about your values or your Son's death for me. I'm going to ignore all of that' - that's the ultimate sin."*²

This statement that unbelief is a worse crime than torture or murder appears in chapter six. Chapter seven is dedicated to arguing that Christianity as a whole should not be held responsible for the torture and murder of unbelievers.

Unfortunately, precious little is available in print countering apologetic claims, and as far as I know nothing that is a truly comprehensive treatment, understandable to someone with no prior knowledge of biblical scholarship.

Showing what is wrong with apologetic claims, then, is one goal of this book. I shall say things that will come as a shock to some, though to many, it will seem an instance of "machine gunning of butterflies" (a phrase once used to criticize rigorous scrutiny of paranormal claims).

However, I have also become convinced that modern paranormal


claims are worth talking about in trying to understand Christianity's origins. One may say, as many have, that the resurrection appearances were hallucinations. However, as at least one apologist has pointed out, people who hallucinate are often talked out of their hallucinations. Sometimes, though, they aren't and can even convince others that what they think they saw was real. Without discussing cases where this has happened, something will be missing from our account of Christianity's birth.

The results, I must warn my readers, will be embarrassing to orthodox Christians, including some who want nothing to do with apologists. I can't say I'm sorry about this; no matter what apologists do, I believe in free rational inquiry into every kind of question, including religious ones. But believers who would rather not talk too much about the evidence for their beliefs should consider taking a cue from the 18th century philosopher David Hume, who ended his famous attack on belief in miracles by suggesting it was not he who was the biggest threat to religion, but the apologists of his day who made religion an intellectual question by trying to defend it rationally. Believers who listen to Hume should blame the apologists, not me, for the existence of this book. But for myself, I feel half-inclined to thank my opponents for raising the issue.

Finally, when the birth of Christianity has been dealt with, it is worth turning our attention to the modern world. Sensational claims are a social phenomenon. We should ask: "What is the role of these attempted proofs in modern religion?"—and also ask, "How similar is it to other popular nonsense?"

Chapter 1

A Brief History Of [de]Bunk[ing]

robably the most famous discussion of miracles ever written is Section X of David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which argued, "That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavors to establish; and even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains, after deducting the inferior." Despite being only a small portion of a larger work, it has been a dominant fixture of debate over miracles in the two and a half centuries since it was published.

William Lane Craig devoted one chapter of his apologetics textbook *Reasonable Faith* to refuting the objections to miracles raised by Hume and others. Among his reasons for rejecting Hume's arguments is "*There are all sorts of events that make up the stuff of popular books and television shows on unexplained mysteries (such as levitations, disappearing persons, spontaneous human combustion, and so forth)... Yet Hume's principle would require the historian to say that these events never occurred, which is indefensible.*"¹

Craig has two master's degrees, a Ph.D., and a doctorate of theology. In *Reasonable Faith*, he displays an impressive range of knowledge,

discussing New Testament scholarship, the history of a number of philosophical disputes, and even modern astrophysics. For all his learning, however, he shows himself to be completely in the dark regarding cases of supernatural or paranormal claims that are quite definitely bogus. Craig's mention of levitation and spontaneous combustion is a small point in his rebuttal of Hume, but it is a key point in understanding where apologists go wrong. Though not the only reason, naïveté regarding extraordinary claims is a major reason apologists are able to convince themselves that the evidence for any of Christianity's miracles is strong. In this chapter, I do my best to remedy this naïveté with a survey of bogus claims made throughout history, as well as telling the stories of how they've been exposed.

The Earliest Years

One of the earliest exposés—perhaps the earliest—of a supernatural fraud was *Alexander or the False Prophet*, by the Roman satirist Lucian. This Alexander, Lucian says, began his career as a prostitute. Then he became the magician's assistant of a client who had in turn been a follower of the famous Apollonius of Tyana, a pagan holy man whose life has sometimes been cited as paralleling Jesus'.

After the death of his master, Alexander embarked on a scheme of his own. He put a snake inside a hollow goose egg, sealed it with wax and lead, buried it in the ground, and then “discovered” it in front of a crowd. The people were amazed at seeing a snake come out of a goose egg, and Alexander convinced them it was a god. He then set up shop as a fortune teller, giving oracles from the “god,” which had miraculously grown into a great serpent in a few days and gained a human head to boot! In fact, the human head was a puppet head, which apparently looked realistic enough in a darkened room where people had to hurry out to make room for the next wave of gawkers.

Alexander's business became giving answers to questions given to him on sealed scrolls. The answers were nonsense, but he impressed people by appearing to know what was on the scrolls without opening them. The truth was that he was opening the scrolls and reading

them, and then carefully resealing them to make it look like they had never been read.

Alexander was quite successful, building up a network of co-conspirators whom he sent forth to spread rumors about himself, including claims that he had raised the dead. He had no trouble turning the crowds against his enemies. On one occasion, he proclaimed that a missing young man had been murdered by servants, and the servants were put to death. It turned out that the man was alive, but when Alexander was denounced, his followers tried to kill the denouncer rather than listening to him.

A number of people, including Lucian himself, managed to trap Alexander. For example, Lucian gave him a scroll which, on the outside, said it had eight questions. Alexander returned eight nonsensical answers. Apparently, he was getting lazy and failed to read the scroll, for it contained only one question: "When will Alexander be caught cheating?"²

Hume discussed the case of Alexander in his essay, and observed that "it does not always happen, that every Alexander meets with a Lucian." For antiquity, this is a gross understatement. Lucian's debunking of Alexander is, to my knowledge, unique. We do have many cases of writers trying to debunk specific miracle claims. One Christian bishop, near the end of the second century, wrote a treatise explaining many common magician's tricks of the time. Plutarch, in his *Lives*, at one point goes on a digression to explain various phenomena attributed to statues of the gods, including sweating, crying, moaning, and even speaking (though in this last case all he can propose is group hallucination). However, Lucian's book is the sole example from that time of a case where a specific claim has been investigated and exposed.

It isn't hard to see why. Skeptics were in the minority in antiquity. Faced with an endless succession of superstitious claims, they often satisfied themselves with philosophical argument or ridicule. Ridicule was Lucian's weapon of choice in his fictitious dialogue *The Lover of Lies*, in which various characters assail Tychiades, Lucian's mouthpiece, with all kinds of fantastic stories. Cleodemus, for example, tells Tychiades

of a wizard who could fly and walk on water, and who worked a love charm for a young man whom Cleodemus was tutoring. The wizard summoned up the shade of the young man's father, then Hecate and Cerberus, and then drew down the moon. At the climax the wizard made a clay cupid to fetch the desired woman. Tychiades responds by remarking that he knew the woman in question and that she could have been gotten for twenty drachmas without the involvement of any wizard. He also wonders why the wizard was selling love charms for money when he could just make rich women fall in love with him.

Such was all that could be done in the face of a flood of extraordinary tales. A number of other sources corroborate Lucian's picture of a world where bunk ran rampant. We have a number of contemporary reports of people seeing Greek gods. Often, these make a point to emphasize that they occurred "not in dream but in waking reality." One inscription found outside the city of Miletus states that the area had experienced a great wave of encounters with gods since the current priestess had taken office.³

Another striking example comes from the historian Josephus, our major source for the history of Israel in Jesus' era. In one passage, he recounts numerous supernatural signs that had portended the destruction of Jerusalem just a couple of decades earlier in 70 A. D.: A sword-shaped star was spotted in the sky. A comet stayed in the sky for a whole year. At the ninth hour at night, the temple altar began shining with a light as bright as day. A cow gave birth to a lamb. A gate that required twenty men to move opened of its own accord. At sunset, armies were seen marching about in the clouds. At Pentecost, priests who gathered to perform their rites felt a quake, heard a great noise, and then heard what sounded like a crowd of voices saying "Let us remove hence." All of this comes in a single passage of Josephus' *The Jewish War*.⁴ As far as we know, neither the god-sightings nor Josephus' portents were challenged by skeptics.

When the Roman Empire slipped into the dark ages and Christianity became the dominant worldview, skepticism disappeared altogether. Christians gobbled up miracle stories involving saints and did not always

see the need to denounce the competition as fraudulent. We see this in the 4th century church father Eusebius, when he set out to refute the claim that Apollonius was a greater man than Jesus. Eusebius seems aware of the possibility that all the miracle stories involving Apollonius could all be legends. Instead of dismissing them all as legends, though, he proclaimed it likely that some were real events, worked by demons. Christians were even happy to attribute such powers to people who wanted no reputation for having them; this is what happened during the witch-crazes.

As we leave the Dark Ages, we see examples here and there of critical examination of miracle claims. For example, in the 14th century, a Catholic bishop investigated the Shroud of Turin and miraculous healings supposedly connected with it. He reported that the man who painted the shroud had confessed and that people had been paid to falsely represent themselves as healed. We know this because we have a letter written by the bishop to the Pope, though unfortunately (from the point of view of writing a sketch such as this one), the details of the investigation are not recounted. (Recent attempts to defend the Shroud's authenticity will be examined in a later chapter).

In the 18th century, we have the story of Franz Mesmer, who believed that he had discovered an invisible fluid called "animal magnetism," which could be stored in just about any kind of object and used to cure diseases. He had trouble promoting his ideas in Vienna, where he had gotten his medical education, but in Paris he received so many patients that he had to devise a way to "magnetize" (or "Mesmerize") a large number of people at once. Mesmer created a system he called banquets, where many patients would sit around a wooden tub which held, among other things, bottles of "magnetized" water. The patients received the power of these tubs by holding on to metal rods coming out of the things. Part of the sensation of Mesmer's demonstrations was the convulsions they caused in his patients. According to Charles Mackay, "Some of them sobbed and tore their hair, others laughed till the tears ran from their eyes, while others shrieked and screamed and yelled till they became insensible altogether."

What was going on here? The French government commissioned an investigation by a committee of prominent scientists, including Ben Franklin. They spent five months doing experiments. One of the questions they tried to answer: what would happen if a subject was “magnetized” without his or her knowledge? Result: nothing. Mesmerism was a matter of suggestion, not magnetism.⁵

Mesmer is an excellent early example of something that has been a growing phenomenon ever since the dawn of the scientific age: pseudoscience. He wrapped his cures in scientific language, but unlike real scientists, he had no careful observations in support of his claims. Indeed, the application of scientific technique to his claims exposed them as bogus.

At first, it might seem odd to try to understand the supernatural claims of two millennia ago with reference to claims such as Mesmerism. But think: if you saw a demonstration of Mesmerism without knowing that “magnetism” is a real phenomenon even if “animal magnetism” is not, and furthermore had no cultural bias in favor of suits over animal skins, would you be able to tell the difference between Mesmerism and the rituals of a tribal shaman? Probably not. Mesmer took old-fashioned magical healing and cloaked it in scientific terminology. Furthermore, ideas of magical healing probably arose in the same way. Animal magnetism started as a speculation based on the scientific knowledge of the day and was then “confirmed” through some poor experimental technique. To primitive peoples, supposing that some mysterious entities caused diseases must have seemed a reasonable conjecture. Once it was established, it became natural to wonder if these beings could be influenced by pleas or commands. Like Mesmerism, this was probably “confirmed” and thus became widely accepted.

Spiritualism

So far, the investigations described have been isolated events. That’s really all we have in human history though the first half of the 19th century. Rigorous examination of fantastic claims first became a really systematic endeavor with the spiritualist craze of the 19th century.⁶ It

began with the Fox sisters, two little girls who, in 1848, decided to play a trick on their mother by making rapping noises and attributing them to disembodied spirits. They soon found themselves on tour, making the spirits answer questions by having different numbers of raps stand for answers. In 1888, forty years after starting, they finally admitted the deception and gave a public demonstration of how the raps were produced from the joint of their big toes.

The confession was motivated in large part by the fact that in the forty years between the first and last raps, the Fox sisters inspired countless more sophisticated imitators. A typical performance involved a supposedly restrained medium producing music, ghostly hands, and various floating objects. Careful investigations eventually extinguished the craze, but the process took time. Major investigative bodies such as the Seybert Commission and the Society for Psychical Research were not formed until the 1880's. Some of the most famous exposures, such as that of Eusapia Palladino, which I look at shortly, did not happen until the early 1900's.

In some ways, the attempts at scientific investigation left much to be desired. Oftentimes, investigators had a strong bias towards proving the existence of spiritualistic phenomena. Scientists generally did not have the skills to detect fraud, since in their normal laboratory work the equipment never consciously tried to play tricks on them. To be effective, investigators often had to enlist the help of magicians. The medium Margery Crandon nearly won a \$5,000 prize from *Scientific American* and was stopped only by the intervention of Harry Houdini, who, in addition to being known for illusions, was also interested in debunking claims of actual power.

In spite of these problems, the interest in scientific investigation played an important role in exposing frauds. Consider the case of Eusapia Palladino, who was especially willing to submit her feats to inspection by teams of investigators. In one investigation, an investigator crawled along the floor to observe Eusapia's feet. He saw her take her foot out of her shoe to use it to fish for a guitar so that she could produce her mysterious music. The investigator grabbed her foot, get-

ting a good scream out of the medium. Some believers, however, were not convinced. They insisted that even if the medium cheated some of the time, at other times she produced genuine phenomena. A further séance was arranged to respond to such claims. In a prime example of a well-controlled experiment, investigators arranged to allow her to do whatever she wanted for the first part of the séance, and then immobilize her on a signal. Before the signal, all manner of phenomena were produced; after, none were.

Now it is time to look at the first of the three claims that William Lane Craig puts forward in attempting to show why Hume was wrong. Though it's impossible to be sure what levitation Craig had in mind, by far the most famous alleged case occurred in 1868, two decades into the spiritualist craze.⁷ The levitator was D. D. Home, a man who on other occasions produced a standard array of spiritualistic manifestations. The claim is that Home, in the presence of three friends, floated out one window of a house they were staying in and in through a different window.

The honesty of the witnesses has never been questioned. Should we believe this claim, though? Hardly. The mere fact that it occurred during an era where fraudulent mediums were common casts suspicion on it. The feat occurred at night, under poor lighting, and the witnesses did not even see the entire aerial trip. Levitation is an illusion that many stage performers have in their repertoires, and Houdini offered to duplicate Home's specific feat if given similar conditions. Home avoided the sort of full, dramatic exposure that Palladino received by never giving a public sitting, but was caught cheating all the same. In one case, he presented a purported apparition of the dead infant son of one R. Barret Browning. Browning, who had never had a son die in infancy, responded by grabbing the "apparition," which turned out to be Home's foot. For all these reasons, there is nothing "indefensible" about denying that Home really levitated.

Investigations of spirit mediums resulted in a number of spin-off activities, a major one being attempts to study ghost sightings. Just a few years after its formation, the Society for Psychical Research published

the two-volume work *Phantasms of the Living*, which documented many cases of ghost sightings. One of the authors of the book, Frank Podmore, was thoroughly disillusioned by fraudulent mediums, but believed until the day he died that there was something real behind ghost sightings. Along with the increased interest in apparitions came new theories about what was going on. In a later work, Podmore ridiculed the idea of ghosts, and argued the apparitions he collected could only be explained by the then-new idea of telepathy.⁸

Unfortunately, the case here does not seem to have turned out much better than with the spirit mediums. Investigators were often forced to come face to face with the fallibility of human testimony. Douglas Blackburn reported that he had never encountered a case without some problem casting doubt on it, and that when such problems surfaces people had a strong tendency to “touch up” their stories. He also complained that many people seem incapable of accurate observation: “It is an amazing fact that I have never yet, after hundreds of tests, found a man who could accurately describe ten minutes afterwards a series of simple acts which I performed in his presence.” Blackburn also protested against the idea that “persons of character” can always be trusted not to lie.⁹ Probably, investigators were just as wrong to assume that such people could be trusted not to do other things, such as hallucinate.

Over time, investigators were forced to recognize the problems with anecdotal data and began trying to establish the existence of things like telepathy in the laboratory. The new endeavor was dubbed parapsychology, and it continues to this day. It is hard to say when “serious” parapsychologists gave up ghost hunting, but the completeness of the shift can be seen in one modern pro-parapsychology book: “case collections [of anecdotes] alone can never be sufficient to establish the reality of psi phenomenon.”¹⁰ Decades of trying in the laboratory search have produced nothing conclusive.¹¹ Notably, though, parapsychologists seem to consider the laboratory search for telepathy less futile than attempts to find an indisputable ghostly manifestation.

Recent Years

By many accounts, the last half century has seen an explosion of pseudo-scientific claims. Certainly the variety of such claims is incredible. When the skeptical Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) was founded in 1976, the claims to be examined were listed as follows: “psychic healing, psychokinesis, immortality, reincarnation, Kirlian photography, orgone energy, psychic surgery, faith healing, astrology, the chariots of the Gods, UFOs, dianetics, astral projection, exorcism, poltergeists, and the ‘talents’ of Uri Geller, Edgar Cayce, and Jeane Dixon.” This list is by no means exhaustive.

What are we to make of this apparent explosion?

Part of it probably has to do with the rise of mass media—newspapers, magazines, popular books, and most recently television. Many modern pseudoscientific claims are things which, if they had been made in an earlier age, would have remained local tales or curiosities. Today they can be promoted on primetime television and in New York Times bestsellers. Another element of the apparent “explosion” of pseudoscientific claims is that old things get put in modern wrapping. Mesmer is one example, though there are many others. Attempts to cure disease via homeopathy, crystals, and the like may be seen as a modern version of attempts at cures using relics associated with various saints. Psychics like Uri Geller are nothing more than a mutant form of spirit mediums, who are themselves an incarnation of religious figures like Alexander.

Whatever the increase in bogus claims, recent years have seen them subjected to critical scrutiny as never before. Even the most trivial claims do not escape close investigation. CSICOP member Joe Nickell, for example, has devoted considerable time to investigating phenomena associated with religious icons, even going to the point of using a stethoscope to check statues for heartbeats. His findings, condensed version: Plutarch was on the right track.¹²

The existence of organized pro-paranormal organizations means a degree of self-policing. It is not often that paranormal enthusiasts de-

bunk a claim, but there are occasional cases, paralleling the debunking of the Shroud of Turin by a Catholic bishop in the Middle Ages. One case of this is *The Amityville Horror*, a 1977 book initially sold as a true story. It told of how George and Kathy Lutz and their children moved into a house bought cheap because of the murder that had taken place in it. They were soon plagued by such problems as spontaneous levitations and a pig-like “angel” who told their daughter there was a young ghost in the house, and the “angel” wanted to make her the ghost’s permanent playmate! The book was a best seller and ended up being made into two movies. However, in 1978 *Fate* magazine, which claims to publish “true” reports of the paranormal, ran an article called “The Amityville Horror Hoax” that pointed out numerous problems with the story as presented. Those responsible for the *Horror* hoax confessed the following year.¹³

Given the wide variety of claims available for consideration, I will hold off on discussing many major claims until later. Among the claims to be discussed in later chapters are faith healing, alien abduction, scientists drilling to hell, and cattle mutilation. These are all cases where close examination has not only allowed a claim to be debunked, but to learn something about how such claims are generated, something we might not have learned if the claim had been made in an earlier era. For now, though, I will be momentarily satisfied with discussing the last two claims that William Lane Craig holds up against Hume.

At first I was a bit puzzled by the mention of “disappearing persons;” what is so fantastic about getting lost in the woods? However, there are a number of stories which Craig might be thinking of:

One is the story of the “vanishing hitchhiker,” where a hitchhiker is picked up and asks to go to such-and-such a place. On arrival, the driver turns to look in the back seat, and the hitchhiker has disappeared. If such a story is what Craig had in mind, he’s even more foolish than his belief in levitation would indicate. “Vanishing hitchhiker” stories have been studied carefully by some folklorists, and they bear all the standard signs of being urban legends: a core story gets re-told with numerous variants, one common modification being to make the set-

ting the teller's hometown.¹⁴ In some Christian circles, the passenger announces that "Jesus is coming soon" before disappearing.¹⁵ Many Mormon versions of the story have the hitchhiker advise the driver to store up food for a coming famine before disappearing.¹⁶

Craig may have, however, been thinking of a different story. Paranormal enthusiasts have told a story of one David Lang who, in 1880, went out to have a look at his horses and vanished right in front of his family and a judge! Unfortunately, investigations have shown that while Mr. Lang may not have been anywhere to be found after 1880, he did not exist before 1880 either. In an interesting twist, one writer claimed that while no David Lang existed, the story really happened to an Orion Williamson. Again, searches of public records by CSICOP member Joe Nickell failed to turn up any record of an Orion Williamson existing in the first place.¹⁷

What about spontaneous human combustion? This seems to be a case of an old claim where the truth has been known for some time, but where credulous material continues to get published. One of the earliest alleged cases is that of Madame Millet, whose burnt remains were found in her kitchen in 1725. Her husband was convicted of murder, but then his conviction was overturned because the court decided it had been a case of spontaneous combustion. However, an 1883 text on medical jurisprudence noted that the body had been found close to a kitchen fireplace, and therefore she had probably caught herself on fire. An investigation published in CSICOP's journal, *The Skeptical Inquirer*, found that numerous cases are just as un-mysterious, the victim having been found near a fireplace, candle, or pipe.¹⁸

Some Conclusions

Though not exhaustive, the preceding survey allows us to draw some general conclusions about miracle claims. Importantly, it would appear that one of Hume's arguments for skepticism of miracle claims needs modification. "It is strange," he wondered, "that such prodigious events never happen in our days." It would be better to say that, yes, such prodigies are claimed in our days, but they are regularly exposed as

bogus. Hume continued his argument by saying, “it is nothing strange, I hope, that men should lie in all ages.” I should say that it would not be strange if the ancient claims were, in general, no different than the modern ones.

Christian apologists, I should note, are not so ready to admit that genuine miracles do not happen today. Gary Habermas has tried to rebut skepticism regarding miracles by insisting that “Evidence that there have been (and perhaps still are) supernatural phenomenon” but they are “not as well-attested as Jesus’ resurrection.”¹⁹

This statement is extremely telling, due to a feature of historical research that many people fail to realize. Just about everything that happens today is better-documented than similar events in the ancient world. The ideal source for any historian is one that was not only written by an eyewitness but which was produced immediately after the events it records: a letter, a diary, an official record. Such sources can only rarely be found for the events of ancient history. When we look at the Bible, we find that some of the information about church history in the epistles meets this standard, but none of the information about Jesus does. Regardless of whether any books were written by eyewitnesses, nobody thinks the gospels were written on the first Easter evening.

Compare this to the situation with, say, Benjamin Franklin. The Yale University/American Philosophical Society edition of his papers consists of thirty-seven volumes. The first of these contains 118 separate items, starting with records of Franklin’s birth and baptism. Clearly, we are in a much better position to know about the life of Franklin than any figure of ancient history. The same goes for the rest of America’s founding fathers (even if they weren’t all as prolific as Franklin).

Beyond better primary sources, the printing press has given us infinitely better secondary sources for the modern era. Not only do newspapers record events of public interest the day they happen, books are produced at an astounding, almost worrisome, rate. When I see things like a dozen books for sale on Amazon.com about the Scott Peterson case—a murder case that frankly had no reason to become a matter of national discussion—I am tempted to wonder whether anything can


happen today without two books being written within a month.

Now, if miracles happen today—a possibility Habermas wants us to keep open—they should be far better evidenced than ancient miracles. To say that no miracle is as well-evidenced as the resurrection is to say that either miracles don't happen today or that God has been extraordinarily careful never to leave too much evidence for miracles. I find the former possibility more plausible.

I do not expect apologists to be deterred by the lack of genuine modern miracles, however. They generally seem confident that they can prove the historicity of the resurrection regardless. In the next chapter, I will show how much of this conclusion is founded in fallacies that closely parallel fallacies committed by promoters of modern bunk.

Chapter 2

Common Fallacies

any of those who have written on the array of recent pseudosciences have tried to describe exactly what makes a pseudoscience. Though precise definitions are hard to devise, observers have found characteristics common to a great many of the claims discussed in the previous chapter. Among these characteristics are characteristic fallacies shared to a remarkable extent by the arguments of Christian apologists. The resemblance is so close that I feel the need to assure my reader that nothing I am quoting was originally targeted at Christian apologetics, save brief treatments of the Shroud of Turin, an issue where apologists have largely conceded the skeptical case (see chapter 8). The extent to which Christian apologists match their descriptions of pseudoscience will have to be explained in other ways.

Disconfirmation and Rationalization

Here's one account of pseudoscience given by Carl Sagan: "Hypotheses are often framed precisely so they are invulnerable to any experiment that offers a prospect of disproof, so even in principle they cannot be invalidated. Practitioners are defensive and wary. Skeptical scrutiny is opposed. When the pseudoscientific hypothesis fails to catch fire with scientists, conspiracies to suppress it are deduced."¹

All of this will be dealt with in time, but now I'll just deal with the first part. One example of inoculating a claim from disproof comes in the area of alien abductions. Sagan notes one claim made by proponents

that millions of people around the globe have been abducted and quips, “It’s surprising more of the neighbors haven’t noticed.” The response of one UFOlogist: in abductions, both abductee and alien become invisible! “Such explanations,” Sagan notes, “explain everything, and therefore nothing.”²

Perhaps one of the best examples, though, comes in the rationalizations made for wonderworkers. Magician-debunker James Randi railed against these in his exposé of Uri Geller. He describes how the rationalizations are so common that they amount to a set of venerated rules for analyzing psychics:

1. *Psychic powers come and go, so a psychic who is periodically unable to do anything must be real.*
2. *Psychics are compulsive cheats, and this must be forgiven.*
3. *Skeptics must explain away all feats exhibited by the psychic. Exposed cheats are assumed to have a bit of real power.*
4. *Psychics cannot produce when people with “negative attitudes” are present.*³

These rules clearly make it impossible to ever prove that a psychic is fraudulent. If one sets up conditions in which a psychic can’t cheat, as was done to Uri Geller on *Johnny Carson*, the psychic’s failure then proves nothing (rule 1). Even being caught red-handed proves nothing (rule 2), a claim that is itself rationalized by the claim that because psychic powers are unreliable (rule 1 again), psychics are forced to cheat. Furthermore, the fact that a psychic either failed to produce or was forced to cheat can be attributed to the presence of skeptics (rule 4), bypassing the obvious explanation that skeptics are good at preventing and catching fraud. Randi remarks: “With such a rule, I could claim to be the greatest conjuror in the world, able to turn myself into an inkwell at will. If a skeptic were present, however...”

This feature of pseudoscientific reasoning comes across clear in apologetic attempts to prove the “amazing accuracy” of the Bible.⁴ Some Christian apologists simply argue that the gospels are historically reliable; therefore we should trust them when they report miracles and alternative theories must account for every detail in the resurrection

accounts.⁵ Some of the arguments in this area will be dealt with in the next two chapters; for now I'm only going to be looking at the claim that outside evidence confirms the New Testament.

The “amazing accuracy” line of apologetics involves compiling long lists of details of the gospels confirmed in outside sources: John the Baptist existed, the book of Acts uses terminology correctly, et cetera, finding as many examples as they can (a recent Norman Geisler book boasts 140 allegedly confirmed details!⁶) Now, there's an obvious (well, not to the apologists) point that needs to be made here: just because some details of an account are correct does not mean that the entire thing is correct. Case in point: when I read *The Amityville Horror*, I had no trouble identifying some somewhat obscure factual points: there really was a famous parapsychologist named J. B. Rhine, there really are a pair of ghost hunters named Ed and Lorraine Warren. Further reading revealed that the hoax was built around a real murder case in a real house which a family named the Lutzes really moved into, only to leave a month later. The Warrens really participated in a séance at the house, and the character of Father Mancuso was based on a real priest in the Rockville Center Diocese (the name was not real, though; he was one of the people whose name was “changed to protect their privacy,” as per a statement in the original book). The fact that some of the details in *The Amityville Horror* are true did not keep its fantastic supernatural claims from being false.

It should be noted here, though, that not all the small details checked out. The first indicators that it was a hoax came in the form of isolated discrepancies and falsehoods. The priest, when interviewed, denied that he had ever been in the house and said he had certainly not been told by a disembodied voice to “Get out!” Another priest in the same diocese denied the rectory had suffered from a horrible odor. A police officer denied going to the house to check on vibrations.

Unfortunately, we don't have any eyewitnesses to interview to check out the Gospel stories. What we do have are several accounts that can be checked against each other. This is because the New Testament was not originally one book but a set of books that circulated separately.

When we compare these separate accounts, we find discrepancies that cast plenty of doubt on the reliability of the gospels.

This is a key issue when dealing with claims that the gospels have seen “overwhelming” confirmation of their historicity. Talking about confirmation means talking about possible disconfirmation.

Rather than delve into specifics right away, I want to look at how apologists deal with the problems in the Bible. In his interview with Lee Strobel in *The Case for Faith*, here is how Norman Geisler begins the discussion of inerrancy:

I've made a hobby of collecting alleged discrepancies, inaccuracies, and conflicting statements in the Bible. I have a list of about eight hundred of them... All I can tell you is that in my experience when critics raise these objections, they invariably violate one of seventeen principles for interpreting scripture... For example, assuming the unexplained is unexplainable.⁷

These rules seem quite well-respected among those who are committed to the inerrancy of the Bible; Josh McDowell quotes them in full in one of his books.⁸ Yet even from this partial quotation from Strobel, they begin to look dubious.

There is some truth to the statement that the unexplained is not necessarily unexplainable. This is hinted at in the above cited complaint of Randi. As he explains elsewhere in the introduction,⁹ the nature of stage magic is such that small inaccuracies in a report of a magician's performance can turn a mundane trick into a mystery. However, we have independent evidence of this, and it remains possible to examine an alleged psychic using experienced observers. In contrast, I have never heard an explanation of why a supposedly inerrant book would have lots of things that look for all the world like contradictions, and Geisler's rules raise the question of whether he would accept anything as evidence of contradiction.

One look at Geisler's own explanation of this rule makes it clear that the answer is “no.” Geisler frankly admits that “No informed person would claim to be able to fully explain all Bible difficulties.”¹⁰ His advice to scholars is that when they find a problem they can't explain, they

should just plug on, confident that someone will find a rationalization someday. With a rule like this, I wonder why he needs the other sixteen. I suppose it comes first in his list for a reason.

A look at the rest of Geisler's rules should remove any lingering doubt about his willingness to accept evidence contrary to his claims. Among the rules is one which says the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy only applies to the original manuscripts of the Bible, not what we have now.¹¹ This principle allows him to simply allege that the passage in question was miscopied when faced with a really damning contradiction, such as the question of at what age Jehoiachin began his rule (II Kings 24:8 vs. II Chronicles 36:9) or, worse, who killed Goliath—David or somebody named Elhanan (I Samuel 17 vs. II Samuel 21:19).¹² I do not know of any instances where this strategy is employed in the New Testament, but it demonstrates the willingness of Geisler and his ilk to use any rationalization, no matter how *ad hoc*, to defend the accuracy of the Bible.

Geisler, though, is perfectly confident he can defend this position. He tells Strobel:

I'm sure some sharp critic could say to me, 'What about this issue?' and even though I've done a forty-year study of these things, I wouldn't be able to answer him. What does that prove, though — that the Bible has errors or that Geisler is ignorant? I'd give the benefit of the doubt to the Bible, because of the eight hundred allegations I've studied, I haven't found one single error in the Bible, but I've found a lot of errors by critics.¹³

Of course, the only reason Geisler has yet to find an error in the Bible is because methodology ensures no error can possibly be found. The main reason he finds lots of errors by critics is that by Geisler's methodology, "he's made a mistake" is a forgone conclusion the moment someone doubts the inerrancy of the Bible.

If one is willing to allege copying errors to resolve contradictions, it will always be possible to maintain the logical possibility that the autographs of the books of the Bible were inerrant. I have no way of showing it is logically impossible that the autographs contained the

same problems found in the best surviving manuscripts. What I can do is look at apparent discrepancies and ask, “What is the most plausible conclusion?”

Problems in the stories of Jesus’ life can literally be found from beginning to end. I will deal with the “end” part in the chapters on the empty tomb and appearances of Jesus. For now, I will look at the “beginning” part for the sake of demonstrating just how embellished the stories became by the time of writing of Matthew and Luke (Mark was probably written before these, John after them).

Simplest question first: who was Jesus’ paternal grandfather? Matthew says Jacob (v. 1:16), but Luke says Heli (v. 3:23). In *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, Josh McDowell presents no fewer than four different proposals for resolving this contradiction. He isn’t entirely sure which one is right, but favors the theory that Luke is really tracing Jesus’ genealogy through Mary. He manages to spend nearly two and a half pages defending the claim without ever explaining how it is that “Joseph, son of Heli” means “Heli was Mary’s father.”¹⁴

It’s a contradiction, and an especially clear one at that. Furthermore, we can understand why it’s there. The evangelists would have wanted to link Jesus to David genealogically for reasons of both messianic prophecy and general pedigree. For this reason, they either made up genealogies or uncritically accepted genealogies that someone else had made up. However, it seems the writers didn’t know each other, since they failed to coordinate their claims.

Next, take the date of the nativity story. Both Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus was born under the rule of Herod, but Luke also says that Quirinius was governor of Syria at the time. The problem is that Herod died in 4 B.C., while Quirinius did not become governor until 6 A.D.¹⁵

Apologists will actually use this as an example of the Bible’s accuracy has been proven by archaeology. McDowell, under the heading “The Incredible Accuracy of Luke,” claims that “it is now supposed” (by who, McDowell doesn’t say) “that Quirinius was governor twice – once in 7 B.C. and the other time in 6 A.D.” This is based on an inscription

“ascribing Quirinius to the post.”¹⁶

Unfortunately, while the inscription mentions Quirinius as a magistrate, it does not specifically say he was governor of Syria. The inscription wasn’t even found in Syria. When McDowell mentions that the inscription was found in Antioch, he neglects to mention that it was not the Antioch in Syria but Antioch of Pisidia, which is in modern-day Turkey.

Lee Strobel’s *The Case for Christ* provides an even worse example of an attempt to claim archaeology has vindicated the Bible on this point. Interviewee John McRay claims that “an eminent archaeologist named Jerry Vardaman” discovered coins with tiny letters on them, too small to be seen with the naked eye, showing that someone named Quirinius was proconsul of Syria from 11 B.C. until after Herod’s death.¹⁷

To be blunt, the letters that Strobel and McRay believe vindicated the Bible are imaginary, at most as real as the images of the Virgin Mary on grilled cheese sandwiches. Vardaman seems to have been seeing letters where there were only scratches. The alleged letters are so small that they would have been beyond the ability of the ancients to produce, and even if they were there, they would have been erased by weathering.

One might get the impression from Strobel’s book that Vardaman’s claims are mainstream, but they have never been published in a peer reviewed journal. When ancient historian Richard Carrier contacted members of the American Numismatic Society on the issue, none of them had heard of Vardaman’s claims and several agreed that the claims were absurd.¹⁸

As bad as much evangelical scholarship is, this arguably gives even the most dogmatic conservatives reason to be embarrassed to have had anything to do with Strobel’s book.

Joseph’s father and Quirinius’ governorship may provide the most direct problems for the reliability of the accounts of Jesus’ early life, but the entire birth narratives are problematic. Though few people realize it, the pageants performed by children every year at Christmas are not true to the text of the Bible. If pageant organizers tried to write

them this way, the result would be highly implausible stories, if they succeeded at all.

Luke begins with the census order from Caesar Augustus. This prompts Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem, where she gives birth to Jesus in a manger because there was no room in the inn. Shepherds are alerted by angels, run to see Jesus, and then go around telling everyone. Jesus' parents take him to Jerusalem at the time required by Jewish law (41 days after his birth, as per Leviticus 12) and then return to Nazareth. Then, according to Luke 2:39, "When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth."

Obviously this lacks much of the standard pageant material, so now let's look at Matthew's contribution. In it, Joseph marries Mary with the reassurance of an angel, and she gives birth in Bethlehem. Why Bethlehem? This isn't explained. The reader could be forgiven for thinking this is where they were originally from. Good thing we have Luke to set the record straight. The wise men visit Jesus at a house (not a manger like in the pageants). Apparently, they found a house to stay in while waiting to take Jesus to Jerusalem. Anyway, the Magi have tipped off Herod about Jesus (the shepherds were more discreet in spreading the word) so the holy family flees to Egypt, to return after Herod's death.

Here's where it gets really confusing. Did God give Herod a heart attack so that Mary and Joseph would be able to return to Jerusalem within the 41 day window? If so, why didn't he do so before they had to flee? Would they have even had the time for a two-way trip to Egypt in those 41 days? Was Herod really slow in sending out his soldiers, giving Mary and Joseph time to stop in Jerusalem before fleeing to Egypt?

At the end of Matthew's account, Joseph considers a return to Bethlehem, and goes to Nazareth only for fear of Herod's brother. It would seem he got quite attached to Bethlehem in his short stay there.

A common harmony is to say that Jesus' parents got their house in Bethlehem after their visit to Jerusalem. In order to make this work, one has to take the word "when" in Luke 2:39 to mean "after _____,

they eventually” rather than “right after.” I’m not sure that the reading is really legitimate, but suppose we take it for the sake of argument. What happens?

We must conclude that for some reason, Joseph and Mary got a house in Bethlehem after going to Jerusalem, even though this would have been an ideal time for God to warn them to stay out of Bethlehem. As this story was retold, it got cut nearly in two, each half just happening to provide a coherent explanation for how it came to be that Jesus was born in Bethlehem but raised in Nazareth. Furthermore, the retelling process accidentally deleted a key part, the return to Bethlehem, which is required in order for the story as a whole to make any sense.

It’s hard to see why any of these three things would happen, harder to see why all three would. What isn’t hard to see is why later Christians would develop legends to allow Jesus to be born in Bethlehem in spite of the fact that everyone knew he grew up in Nazareth. John and Mark both have Jesus originating in Nazareth, and have no notion of a birth in Bethlehem. However, as the author of Matthew knew, the Messiah was supposed to be born in Bethlehem. This point also appears in John 7:42, where the Jews argue that Jesus could not have been the Messiah because he was born in Galilee. (Mysteriously, in John neither Jesus nor his disciples give the obvious rebuttal.) Coming up with stories of a Bethlehem birth allowed Jesus to fulfill the prophecy.

It’s instructive to compare Biblical contradictions to other examples of what we think of as damning discrepancies. Take this example from “The Amityville Horror Hoax”:

...in an article in the April 1977 issue of Good Housekeeping, journalist Paul Hoffman quotes George Lutz as saying that temperature changes in rooms did occur, black stains appeared on bathroom fixtures, and his wife slid across the bed one night “as if by levitation.” Lutz says nothing about a horned creature, a marching band or the extensive damage supposedly done to the house.¹⁹

This is of course problematic, since if such events did happen,

how could Lutz have failed to mention them? No, no, Geisler would say, though, this is an example of “assuming a partial report is a false report.”²⁰

An even better example comes from a popular anecdote about two college students who go out drinking together and miss a test the next day because they were hung over. They tell the professor they were on a weekend trip and didn’t get back in time because they had a flat tire and ask to retake the test. The professor agrees. They get the test. The first question, for ten points, isn’t too bad. Then they turn the page and get to the second question, for 90 points: “Which tire?”

The implied ending, of course, is that one might say the front left tire, and the other the front right tire. They’ve contradicted themselves, so the professor knows they’re lying. Or does he? I suppose by Norm Geisler’s rules, the teacher should assume that they had two flat tires.

Does that sound like an absurd comparison? It’s no different from what apologists do when asked whether Jesus cleansed the temple at the beginning of his ministry (as in John) or during the sequence leading up to the crucifixion (as in the other gospels). They say it happened twice, a dubious solution given that after causing one disturbance, it’s unlikely that Jesus would have been allowed to live to cause a second. Yet as Biblical difficulties go, this one is relatively easy to harmonize.

Suppose every discrepancy in the Bible could be harmonized. I’m not sure that they can be, but suppose. It would still destroy the argument from confirmation of the Bible. Harmonization means not taking a clear look at the evidence. It means instead that when you find confirmation, your view is supported, but when you find disconfirmation, you harmonize. You must never, ever admit a real contradiction, even if it means asserting the text was miscopied or saying “It’s the Bible, therefore it’s inerrant, therefore there’s a harmonization in there somewhere, even if I don’t have a clue where.” When apologists take this approach, their evaluation of the evidence has been rigged from the start, and they have no business going around talking about all the confirmation for the Bible’s historicity.

Extraordinary Claims

In *The Case for Faith*, Lee Strobel interviews William Lane Craig to answer general skepticism of miracles:

“Some critics say that the Resurrection is an extraordinary event and therefore it requires extraordinary evidence,” I said. “Doesn’t that assertion have a certain amount of appeal?”

“Yes, that sounds like common sense,” he replied. “But it’s demonstrably false.”

“How so?”

“Because this standard would prevent you from believing in all sorts of events that we do rationally embrace. For example, you would not believe the report on the evening news that the numbers chosen in last night’s lottery were 4, 2, 9, 7, 8, and 3, because that would be an event of extraordinary improbability.”²¹

This provides us another way in which Christian apologists commit the exact same fallacies as proponents of the claims discussed in the first chapter. The following is a quote from “The Nature of Pseudoscience” in Terence Hines’ book *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal*:

Proponents of pseudoscience often complain skeptics are unfair in demanding more proof for pseudoscientific claims than for the claims of “establishment” scientists. This is both true and reasonable, under the circumstances: extraordinary claims demand extraordinary proof... For example, consider the following two claims about transcendental meditation (TM): (1) TM can make you feel better; (2) TM can teach you how to defy the law of gravity and float in the air at will. Most people would accept the validity of the first claim based simply on the testimony of several people who felt better after they learned how to meditate. Clearly, one would demand more proof for the second claim... You’d probably demand that someone actually levitate right in front of you. And you’d probably want a professional magician present to ensure that no trickery was involved.²²

Obviously, a resurrection is more like a levitation than the picking of a lottery number. The odds that a particular lottery number would

be picked may be low, but lottery numbers are picked every day. What invites skepticism about miracles is not that a particular man should rise from the dead or levitate, but that anyone, in any period of history, should do so.

A moment's consideration shows that we ought to demand more evidence for some claims than others. To fail to do so is to commit to believing every bit of nonsense that comes along. However, Christian apologists frequently insist that we have no business demanding better evidence for Christianity's miracle claims than other historical claims. Josh McDowell claims that "If one discards the Bible as being unreliable, then one must discard almost all literature of antiquity."²³ Implication: one has no business being more skeptical of the Bible than other allegedly historical works. By the same logic, a transcendental meditation enthusiast may as well say, "If you don't believe me about my levitation, you can't believe anything anyone ever says," which is of course nonsense.

Another example comes from Greg Boyd's *Jesus Under Siege*, which amounts to little more than a 140-page rant that skeptical scholars are not to be trusted because their goal is to "try to explain how this ordinary human being became 'supernaturalized' in the minds of His followers."²⁴ Amusingly, when interviewed by Lee Strobel he conceded that "you shouldn't appeal to a supernatural explanation until you have to" and it's a good idea to "first look for a natural explanation."²⁵ In neither book does Boyd really show that there are no good unmiraculous explanations for the evidence, but he nevertheless insists that skeptics are just assuming miracles don't happen.

Norman Geisler has specifically argued against demands of "extraordinary evidence," saying, "skeptics don't demand 'extraordinary' evidence for other 'extraordinary' events from history. For example, few events from ancient history are more 'extraordinary' than the accomplishments of Alexander the Great."²⁶ Once again, a resurrection is more like a levitation than military victories. This is an interesting quote because it shows a second example of apologists being aware of the maxim about extraordinary claims without showing any aware-

ness that it was popularized first and foremost by Carl Sagan in his campaigns against modern pseudosciences.²⁷

As best I can determine, apologists have been made aware of the maxim largely through public and online debates, where the origin gets lost. On the other hand, perhaps apologists simply avoid mentioning the phrase's origins because it would force them to come face to face with the question of "would I think my 'evidence' is really credible if it were presented for a belief system other than my own?" That question is at the heart of what I am demanding in this chapter. No doubt it will make many people extremely uncomfortable, but it is not, in final analysis, unreasonable.

Apologists are so set on credulous acceptance of miracle claims that they regularly accuse anyone who disagrees with them of closed-mindedness. One of Josh McDowell's books contains over four pages of quotes on how much evidence there is for the resurrection, including the statement "Nothing but the antecedent assumption that it must be false could have suggested the idea of deficiency in the proof of it."²⁸

William Lane Craig is a particularly rich mine of accusations of closed-mindedness. He has alleged that those who deny that Jesus' tomb was found empty do so only because of philosophical assumptions.²⁹ When one scholar proposed that supernatural explanations should only be considered if there are no plausible natural explanations, Craig dismissed this as a "subterfuge for saying we should never consider a supernatural [explanation]."³⁰

Then there is the gem found later in the interview in *Case for Faith*: Craig says that "I think many skeptics act in a closed minded way... Some skeptics, however, will not allow supernatural explanations even to be in the pool of live options... Apart from some proof of atheism, there's no warrant for excluding supernatural explanations."³¹

Something tells me there's reason to doubt the claims of Transcendental Meditation, apart from a proof of atheism.

Now listen to Craig on Jesus' healings: "the only reason to be skeptical that these were genuine miracles rather than psychosomatic healings would be philosophical—do you believe that such events can

occur or not?”³²

I can't help but wonder: is Craig confused by the medical establishment's refusal to accept the medicinal power of sugar pills?

A final example of such accusations comes from apologist Ravi Zacharias. At a question and answer period after one of his lectures, somebody asked how God could condemn people for not believing in him if they haven't been given good reason to do so. Zacharias responded by saying that “the problem is not the absence of evidence, rather it's the suppression of it.”³³ (Remember my earlier quote from Sagan: “When the pseudoscientific hypothesis fails to catch fire with scientists, conspiracies to suppress it are deduced.”)

How much more evidence, then, is needed for extraordinary claims than for ordinary one? It's worth taking a look at Carl Sagan's thoughts on what would constitute good evidence for extraterrestrial visitation. Sagan, it should be noted, was enthusiastic about the possibility of coming into contact with extraterrestrial life, though he put more hope in the SETI project than the claims of UFOlogists. He knew exactly what it would take for him to take claims of alien visitation seriously. In his book *The Demon Haunted World*, he notes that there is an “irreducible error” in eyewitness accounts, which is why police know to rely on physical evidence. He describes numerous ways in which the evidence was less impressive than it could be: One researcher claims an abductee's immune system baffles her doctors, but it apparently wasn't baffling enough to write up in a medical journal. Many Americans have home security systems, but aliens fail to set them off when they break and enter into people's houses. Women are allegedly impregnated by aliens, but nothing odd is noticed on sonograms. Alleged implants are not shown to contain unusual isotopes or elements. Sagan further notes that “No abductee has filched a page from the captain's logbook, or any examining instrument, or taken an authentic photograph of the interior of the ship, or come back with detailed and verifiable scientific information not hitherto available on Earth. Why not? The failures must tell us something,” and no alien artifacts are recovered made of “unknown alloys, or materials of extraordinary tensile strength or

ductility or conductivity.”³⁴

In the late 1980’s, UFO skeptic Philip Klass suggested that UFOlogists report their extra-terrestrial kidnappings to the FBI for proper investigation, presumably using forensic methodology and solid physical evidence. When Budd Hopkins first heard this proposal, he called it “absurd.” In a moment, I’m going to make a suggestion that apologists will surely think just as absurd, but hear me out.

In October 2005, the local chapter of Campus Crusade for Christ brought in a magician named Andre Kole to entertain students, defend the miracles of Jesus, and denounce competing miracle claims. He informed the audience that as a magician, he knew the miracles described in the gospels could not be magic tricks; therefore they must have been real. It did not seem to occur to him that the stories might be short of 100% trustworthy. To combat the claims of New Agers, he performed an entertaining mock-séance and then talked about how when Houdini had come to the theatre he was in years ago, there was a prize of several thousand dollars for anyone who could exhibit genuine supernatural abilities. Today, he said, the prize is up to one million dollars, and nobody has ever claimed it.

He was referring to a prize administered by the James Randi Educational Foundation. The rules are explained in detail on Randi’s website,³⁵ but basically the money is to be awarded to anyone who can pass two tests of alleged powers under experimental controls designed with the foundation’s supervision.

My absurd suggestion is this: If evangelical Christians wish to prove the truth of their religion through miracle claims, the first thing they should do is forget about the evidence for the resurrection. The second thing they should do is get in touch with the JREF, find some willing test subjects with chronic illnesses, lay hands on them, and miraculously heal them.

I know that apologists will have no trouble giving a dozen reasons why this proposal is a bad one. Let me point out, though, that I am demanding no more than one reasonable Christian has demanded of non-Christian miracle claims.

Furthermore, though the sort of evidence I have been describing is extraordinary in the sense of “potentially far more powerful than the word of one or even a group of persons,” it is perfectly ordinary in the sense that if miracles happened today, it would be no trouble at all to collect the sort of evidence I have described.

Consider, for example, the three-hour supernatural darkness that allegedly accompanied Jesus’ resurrection. Think what would happen if it happened today! Meteorologists would immediately go nuts trying to figure out what was going on. News stations like CNN would scramble reporters to cover it. Every newspaper in the world would have it on the front page the next day. On top of all that, those in the area would talk about the event, often in written sources, for the rest of their lives. That would be good evidence for a miracle.

Or consider a claim I once encountered online. A poster on a discussion forum claimed to have once seen a missing arm regrow. The test here would not really be a matter of gathering witnesses to the actual event. The best approach would be to produce the man with the arm, then produce medical records showing that it was once missing. Losing an arm is the sort of thing one goes to the hospital for. Once the records had been scrutinized for signs of forgery, further confirmation could be gathered from doctors, nurses, and any person who had known the recipient of the healing between the loss of the arm and its regeneration. The fact that the forum-poster did not go to the media with such documentation must tell us something, much as the paucity of corroboration for UFO tales must tell us something.

I stress, however, that it is hardly necessary to set the burden of proof as high as above to rule out the resurrection. It would be enough to demand as much evidence as we have for the levitation of D. D. Home, which, as we will see in the next chapter, simply doesn’t exist.

Another alternative involves Occam’s razor, the principle which states “do not multiply postulated entities without necessity.” Don’t postulate extraterrestrial visitation if it’s not necessary to explain lights in the sky, if they could be weather balloons. Don’t postulate psychic powers if they’re not necessary to explain a guru’s feats, if those feats


could be magic tricks.

This may be the battle ground on which Christian apologists most often fight. Most insist that there are no plausible alternative explanations for the evidence. This is true even of Stephen Davies, the practitioner of “soft apologetics” mentioned in the introduction. He, unlike most of his colleagues, concedes that rational people ought to be very skeptical of miracle claims, and this allows people to reject the miracle claims that have been made in history given the available evidence. He is still convinced, however, that there is no good explanation for the evidence for the resurrection, and this allows people to rationally accept the reality of the event.

Showing why the evidence for the resurrection is no puzzle will be the main goal of the rest of this book.

Chapter 3

What's the Evidence?

ow is the time to consider what kind of evidence we have for the resurrection (or any aspect of the life of Jesus, for that matter). This is the area with the greatest amount of plain misconceptions among laypersons. This is not simply a problem of lack of information. All too often, misconceptions are the result of false or at best misleading information from popular writers, both Christian apologists and secular sensationalists like Dan Brown.

Obviously?

Let's start with the issue of who wrote the gospels. In writings dating from the second century onward, early Christian leaders claimed that the books we call Matthew and John were written by those members of the twelve disciples; that Mark was written by John Mark, companion of Peter; and that Luke was written by Paul's physician. Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ* has, in its first chapter, a couple of the earliest of sources followed by a statement that "John is the only gospel about which there is some question about authorship." There is perhaps some temporary uncertainty about whether Strobel's interviewee, Craig Blomberg, means "the Church fathers didn't question it" or "it's not in question today," though the present tense makes it sound like he's talking about today. There is a quick move to dispel this uncertainty, though: "the gospel is obviously based on eyewitness material, as are the other three gospels."¹

No question about it... at least as Strobel presents it to his readers, though there's a difference between "how Strobel presents it" and how Blomberg presented it in the interview as it actually took place. In e-mail conversation, Blomberg told me that Strobel's write-up of the interview was not verbatim but rather heavily paraphrased and full of what were, in Blomberg's view, oversimplifications. He told me his initial impulse when he saw Strobel's draft was to edit everything for accuracy, but in the end decided to correct only the worst problems. Blomberg agreed that the passage as he left it was open to being misread and said I was not the first to ask him about it.

Strobel is not the first to cultivate the illusion that the evangelical position on the Bible is "obviously" true. Josh McDowell's *The Resurrection Factor* opens with a list of "obvious observations," the last of which is that the gospels are "reliable historical accounts." One can find similar statements going even farther back in the apologetic literature, as in Edwin Yamauchi's claim that the early Church's view is "generally held."²

The truth? The insinuation that the early Church's claims are widely accepted today is exploded by a brief look at respected Biblical scholar Raymond Brown's *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Brown looks at the issue of each gospel's authorship individually, and renders his most charitable verdict with regards to Luke: "not impossible." "It is *not impossible*," Brown says, "that a minor figure who had traveled with Paul for small parts of his ministry wrote Acts decades after the apostle was dead."³ In every other case, Brown rejects the traditional authorship claims altogether.⁴

Let me make clear that I don't cite Brown to show that there are a few dissenting scholars out there; Brown makes clear that he is writing to present the majority scholarly view (pages xi-xii of his book). Rather, I cite him as an excellent example of a scholar who explodes the apologetic fall-back position on the authorship of the gospels. When apologists don't feel comfortable giving their readers the impression that the traditional view is the current consensus, they say things like "A major reason" scholars deny eyewitnesses wrote the gospels is that

“most critics reject the possibility of supernatural events.”⁵ Raymond Brown was a Catholic priest who made clear that he didn’t think much of those who apply a special skepticism to the Bible’s miracle claims. For example, he dismisses those who think the virgin birth impossible with a one-line quip: “How does one know that?”⁶

In spite of this, I have once heard Raymond Brown referred to as a liberal (he concedes that many attempts to harmonize conflicting Biblical passages are implausible). Therefore, I give one more example, Bruce Metzger. Metzger is another evangelical scholar interviewed by Strobel, but in his book *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content* Metzger concedes that in the case of Matthew, “the apostle Matthew can scarcely be the final author” and “no simple solution to the problem of authorship is possible” in the case of John.⁷ Yes, the authorship of the gospels is at least an open question.

It’s worth spending some time on the reasons for doubting that the authors of the gospels were who the Church has claimed. Some popular apologetic arguments are based on complete ignorance of basic Biblical scholarship. For example, one of Josh McDowell’s favorite arguments (and one which appears in works of other writers) is that the books of the New Testament must have been written by eyewitnesses because II Peter 16 says, “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”⁸ This argument is problematic not only because the authorship of II Peter is itself in question, but also because we know that the books of the New Testament were originally circulated independently from one another, and therefore *the authorship of II Peter has no bearing whatsoever on the authorship of the gospels*. This is information available in introductory texts on Biblical scholarship, and apologists like McDowell miss it entirely.

So what does competent scholarship have to say on this issue? The first thing to note is a point brushed by very quickly in the Blomberg interview: “strictly speaking, the gospels are anonymous.”⁹ That is to say, scholars have concluded that the original (now lost) manuscripts did not have the names Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John on them. This

is a point that scholars often mention without bothering to explain. An explanation can be found, however, in the work of Bart Ehrman, a scholar who has done much to popularize the results of New Testament studies: "Because our surviving Greek manuscripts provide such a wide variety of (different) titles for the Gospels, textual scholars have long realized that their familiar names do not go back to a single 'original' title, but were later added by scribes."¹⁰ Also: "Suppose a disciple named Matthew actually did write a book about Jesus' words and deeds. Would he have called it 'The Gospel According to Matthew'? Of course not... if someone calls it the Gospel *according to Matthew*, then it's obviously someone else trying to explain, at the outset, whose version of the story this is."¹¹ This is what Blomberg was apparently conceding with that brief phrase.

Luke and John have some other internal evidence that can be used to support the traditional authorship claims, which I'll discuss below. However, this leaves Matthew and Mark without a shred of internal evidence to support the Church's claims. Matthew was not written in the first person; Mark says nothing about the author getting his information from Peter or even knowing him. Does it really make sense to suppose that a disciple of Jesus would write an account of Jesus' life, but write it in the third person and not even put his name on the book? Similarly, the early church claimed that Mark was not only a companion of Peter, but got all the information in his book from Peter's teachings. Does it really make sense that someone would do this and not say so in the text, or even identify himself as a companion of Peter? No and no. A more likely hypothesis—the hypothesis accepted by many Biblical scholars today—is that these books are collections of oral traditions about Jesus that were circulating in first-century Christian communities. They would have been written by Christians whose only special distinction was the ability to write in an age without mass literacy.

For a number of reasons, it makes perfect sense that collections of oral traditions would later be attributed to people close to Jesus. One reason is a general fact about legends: as they circulate, they are often attributed to more credible sources than the original. For example, in

1990 a story about scientists in Siberia drilling down to Hell briefly made a splash in some Christian media outlets. The story went that they were trying to drill deep into the earth's crust but broke through to an area of 2000 degrees, and when they lowered microphones into the hole, they heard the screams of the damned. Supposedly this was all documented in a "respected Finnish scientific journal."

When Rich Buhler of *Christianity Today* decided to track down the story, he found two somewhat less impressive sources for the article: an article from the newsletter of some Finnish missionaries, and a newspaper clipping sent in by a man from Norway. The Finnish missionaries had received it through a long chain of transmission that dead-ended when Buhler tried to trace it. The newspaper clipping turned out to be about a building inspector; a bogus translation had been furnished by a Norwegian man who had seen American Christians spreading the story and wanted to see if they'd do basic fact checking if he gave them some information. Both the ultimate origin of the story and its attribution to a scientific journal remain somewhat mysterious, but it's a clear case of a story's credentials being upped as it circulated.¹²

This is a particularly striking case, but it is by no means unique. Folklorists who study urban legends often find situations where six different people claim an urban legend really happened, each teller sourcing it to a different relative or friend of a friend to which it "really happened."¹³ This has prompted urban legend debunker Barbara Mikkelson to speak of the "'FOAF [friend of a friend] chain,' that never-ending hall of mirrors where the investigator always feels he is but one or two steps away from speaking with the source of the story, yet no matter how many of the chain's links he tracks down and interviews, he never gets any closer to the person the incident either happened to or who witnessed it first-hand."¹⁴

The possibility that the gospels had their authors upgraded with time becomes particularly serious when one considers the environment of second century Christianity. The second century is what gives us the earliest recorded claims regarding who wrote the gospels. The first source is Papias, whose writings, c. 125 A.D., only survive in fragments.

In one of these fragments, Papias says that Matthew wrote down Jesus' sayings in Hebrew, and Mark, Peter's secretary, wrote down everything that Peter preached about the sayings and doings of Jesus.¹⁵

The statement on Matthew is unhelpful, as the Gospel According to Matthew that we have is a narrative in Greek, not a collection of sayings in Hebrew (or Aramaic). There's another problem with Papias' testimony, however: Papias testified that he preferred oral tradition, "a living and abiding voice," to information recorded in books, and he paid dearly for this preference.¹⁶ Among other things, Papias believed a legend that Judas was so fat that he couldn't squeeze through gaps big enough for wagons, and folds of fat on his face kept even doctors from finding his eyes with their instruments.¹⁷

With such claims circulating by the time of Papias, it would be no surprise if the claim that the gospels were written by the disciples and their companions were simply more legends, no more true than Papias' claim about Judas.

A second element of second-century Christianity that should cause worry for apologists is the so-called "heretical" Christian sects: Ebionites, Marcionites, and the much-discussed Gnostics. Interestingly, the first recorded instance of all four traditional authorship-claims appearing together comes from a polemical work attacking these three groups. The book in question is *Adversus Haereses*, written c. 185 A.D. by the bishop Irenaeus. The relevant passage comes at the beginning of Book III, whose express purpose is to prove the heretics wrong by appeal to scripture. Irenaeus must have been relieved to know that the scriptures he was appealing to were written by credible authorities.

Irenaeus is an important source for information about second century heretics, and among what we learn from him is that competing sects disagreed on what books were to be accepted as canonical. Many sects, including the three I mentioned, did not accept all four gospels. The Ebionites, for example, accepted only Matthew. Though Irenaeus is not explicit, the Ebionites probably were *not* saying "Oh, we know one of the twelve disciples wrote John, but we still don't accept the book's authority." Questions about the authorship of the gospels

existed even in the second century.

Irenaeus conducts no historical inquiry into the authorship of the gospels to refute these heretical views. Instead, he provides philosophical arguments to prove that there must be exactly four gospels. The arguments are the flimsiest of analogies: there must be four gospels because there are four winds, four regions of the earth, four faces on statues of cherubim, and four covenants that God made with man (Adam's, Noah's, Moses', and Jesus').¹⁸ If a modern historian argued that way, nobody would consider him a credible source.

In addition to rejecting some orthodox texts, the Gnostics had their own gospels which the orthodox rejected. Copies and fragments of some of these texts survive, and have gotten considerable attention in recent years. *The Da Vinci Code* presents these as being the original lives of Jesus, the canonical gospels having been written in the era of Constantine. Apologists, on the other hand, insist that these non-canonical gospels are later legendary accounts and nothing like the canonical gospels. I think the truth can be gleaned from comparing resurrection accounts from the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Peter (the latter being the infamous "talking-cross" gospel):

- Gospel of Mark: Jesus is crucified and buried. Some women followers of Jesus go to the tomb and find the stone rolled away. A mysterious young man informs them that Jesus has risen from the dead.
- Gospel of Matthew: Jesus is crucified and buried. The Jewish leaders are worried that the disciples will steal the body, so they have some guards placed at the tomb. Some women followers of Jesus go to the tomb. An angel with an appearance like lightning descends from heaven, causes an earthquake, paralyzes the guards, rolls back the stone, and sits on it. The angel informs the women that Jesus has risen from the dead.
- Gospel of Peter: Jesus is crucified and buried. The Jewish leaders are worried that the disciples will steal the body, so they go with some guards to camp outside the tomb. Two angels come down from heaven, roll back the stone by telekinesis, and go inside

the tomb to get Jesus. When he comes out, he is so tall that his head is literally in the clouds. The cross floats out after him, and exchanges some words with a voice from heaven.

Obviously, the Gospel of Peter is a later account with legendary additions to the canonical stories. However, it also looks as if Matthew too has some legendary material. Once it is admitted that these two books contain legends, one begins to wonder about Mark's story.

Similar comparisons could be made between the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke and the Infancy Gospels of Thomas and James. The general result is that the non-canonical works are full of embellishments, but the canonical ones contain the beginnings of these later, more extravagant legends.

There are a couple of interesting points that should be made about the Gospel of Peter. First, unlike the canonical gospels, the text is perfectly explicit in identifying its author as "I, Simon Peter, brother of Andrew," even though it was written much later and could not possibly have been written by Peter. (The second-century Christian environment was one where people were perfectly willing to lie about the authorship of a book.)

Also of note is a story told by the church historian Eusebius about this book. He says that a second-century bishop named Serapion had written a book to refute the falsehoods in the book, which had been leading some Christians in Rhossus astray. Eusebius gives us a quote from this book:

We, my brothers, receive Peter and all the apostles as we receive Christ, but the writings falsely attributed to them we are experienced enough to reject, knowing that nothing of the sort has been handed down to us. When I visited you, I assumed that you all clung to the true Faith, so without going through the 'gospel' alleged by them to be Peter's, I said: 'If this is the only thing that apparently puts childish notions into your heads, read it by all means.' But as, from information received, I now know that their mind has been ensnared by some heresy, I will make every effort to visit you again; so expect me in the near future. It was

obvious to me what kind of heresy Marcian upheld, though he contradicted himself through not knowing what he was talking about, as you will gather from this letter. But others have studied this same 'gospel,' viz. the successors of those who originated it, known to us as Docetists and from whose teaching the ideas are mostly derived. With their comments in mind, I have been able to go through the book and draw the conclusion that while most of it accorded with the authentic teachings of the Savior, some passages were spurious additions.¹⁹

Notice what is missing: any sort of historical inquiry into the book's authorship. When Serapion first heard about the book, he met the claim of Petrine authorship without a hint of skepticism. Then, it seems, he read the book, found some things in it were heretical, and decided it therefore could not have been written by Peter. What's troublesome about this story is it implies that a non-apostolic book could be passed off as apostolic so long as it taught orthodox doctrines.

To recapitulate: the books of Matthew and Mark are curiously lacking in any internal evidence of having been written by the traditionally assigned authors, and we have little reason to trust what the early church said about these books decades later. What about Luke and John?

Several verses in the book of John refer to a "disciple who Jesus loved" (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20, 24). When the book describes the crucifixion scene, it says that this beloved disciple was present along with Jesus' mother and some other women. A few verses later it says that "He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and [he/there is one who] knows that he tells the truth." At the end of the book, there are some more words about the beloved disciple followed by a statement that "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."²⁰

Some scholars take this second statement as claiming that the disciple put pen to paper and wrote the book, while others think the

verse merely claims to present teachings derived from the disciple. There does seem to be a distinction made between the “he” who gave the testimony, the “we” who know the testimony is true, and the “I” who supposes that the whole world couldn’t contain every deed attributed to Jesus. In any case, though, the “beloved disciple” is a rather odd figure. The original text of the book never gives him a name. The idea of one disciple whom Jesus loved more than the others is absent from the other gospels. Peter, of course, is identified as the rock on which the church would be built, but the book of John makes clear that Peter is not the beloved disciple. Perhaps the best interpretation is that the beloved disciple was an essentially legendary figure, believed by the author of John to be the source of the traditions he was committing to paper. It’s possible, though, that the author simply lied, just as the author of the Gospel of Peter lied.

The evidence for Luke comes by way of the book of Acts. Both Luke and Acts are addressed to somebody named Theophilus, and Acts refers to “the first book” which describes “all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up into Heaven.” The obvious conclusion is that Luke and Acts were written by the same person. Acts, furthermore, occasionally refers to what “we” did when talking about the activities of Paul, which makes sense if the author was a companion of Paul.

Reason can be given for hesitation here: Raymond Brown notes there are points on which Acts seems to conflict with Paul’s letters,²¹ and the “we” passages are not completely unambiguous. The book does not say “I went with Paul’s companions,” and when the “we”s temporarily disappear between chapters 16 and 20, there is no statement to the effect of “Paul and I parted ways.” Still, the case is probably better here than with the other three gospels. What would it mean if Luke/Acts really was written by a companion of Paul?

I have often heard it claimed that in the beginning of Luke, the author says he conducted eyewitness interviews to get the information he reports.²² Looking at the passage, I have trouble seeing the basis of this claim:

Luke 1:1: Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us...

From this verse, we learn that there were many gospels floating around when Luke was written. Probably, these are lost books rather than surviving texts like the Gospel of Peter. It sounds as if gospel-writing was not restricted to apostles and their close companions.

Luke 1:2: ...just as they were handed on to by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word...

This verse claims the stories derive from eyewitnesses, but it doesn't say the author got them straight from eyewitnesses. Rather, the stories were "handed on," probably as oral tradition.

Luke 1:3-4: I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

At last, the author says he investigated these stories. He does not say, however, that he interviewed eyewitnesses. Indeed, unlike some of the better ancient historians, he says nothing about his sources.

We do know something about the author's investigation, however. Our information comes not from the author himself, but from a comparison with the gospels of Matthew and Mark.²³

Scholars have long realized that some copying was going on between the authors of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This can be confirmed by anyone using a book known as a synopsis. Synopses contain either lists of verse citations or lists of verse translations from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, arranged in three columns, with parallel verses next to each other. Not only are there far more instances of parallel verses between these three books than between these books and John, the parallels are generally either word-for-word or nearly so. For example:

Matthew 8:1-4: When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him, and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, and kneeling he said to him: "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean!"

Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. Then Jesus said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”

Mark 1:40-45: A leper to him, begging him “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him, he sent him away at once, saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded as a testimony to them.” But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country, and people came to him from every quarter.

Luke 5:12-16: Once, when he was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.” Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, “I do choose. Be made clean.” Immediately the leprosy left him. And he ordered him to tell no one. “Go,” he said, “and show yourself to the priest, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them.” But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

Clearly, these passages differ to a degree. However, the bold phrases give numerous instances of word-for-word agreement. Such word-for-word agreements appear again and again through these three gospels. Now the only question is who was copying from whom.

Of the four gospels, Mark is the shortest. Once it was thought that Mark was a condensed version of Matthew, but now most scholars

believe that Mark was written first. Among other things, Mark's Greek is the roughest, and it is more likely that later writers improved the original author's language rather than worsening it.

In addition to parallels between all three gospels, or between Mark and one other gospel, there are places where Matthew and Luke parallel each other but have no parallel in Mark. At first, it would seem that one copied from the other. There are some problems with this theory, though. One is the contradictions between Matthew and Luke. Another is the fact that the sayings common to Matthew and Luke are regularly placed in different contexts. If one was copying from the other, then one was taking sayings out of context and inventing new contexts, a pointless exercise.

For these reasons, rather than suppose Matthew was copying from Luke or vice versa, most scholars think that they had, in addition to Mark, a non-surviving source known as Q. (There is no reason to suppose, as *The Da Vinci Code* suggests, that this was a forcibly suppressed document written by Jesus himself which is now being kept in a vault somewhere.) If the author of Luke believed that Mark or Q had been written by eyewitnesses or companions of eyewitnesses, he fails to say so. Nothing more can be said for sure about his sources.

In addition to the "we" passages and the preface, Luke/Acts has one other feature worth discussing: the ending. Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Jerusalem, failing to mention his execution. This signals to more conservative scholars that that's when the book was written. If this were true, it might increase the chances that the author had access to eyewitnesses, in spite of the fact that this isn't explicit.

A closer look at the ending of Acts, however, indicates the author may have had other reasons for ending the story where he did. The scene is a pair of meetings between Paul and the Jewish leaders. Paul asks them for help, since it's the Jews, not the Romans, who landed him under custody in Rome. He witnesses to them, but not all are convinced. Then, as they leave, he boldly denounces them and declares, "Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, they will listen." After this climax there is a one sen-

tence wrap-up which says that Paul “lived there two years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”

From this ending, it seems the author wanted to end his gospel by stating his main message—Christianity is for Gentiles—as well as keeping things upbeat. It follows that mentioning the death of Paul at Gentile hands would have served his purposes poorly, giving him reason to omit it.

Scholars who reject dating Acts c. 62 AD generally opt for a date in the 70’s or 80’s. This puts us at the edge of modern life expectancy, and life expectancies weren’t what they are today back then.

In short, the gospels aren’t great sources. Their best information is perhaps third-hand, and much of it would have passed through more retellings than that. As far as proving a miracle goes, this is hardly any evidence at all.

The One Eyewitness

There is one piece of evidence I have left out so far, however. Though not all of the epistles in the New Testament were necessarily written by who they claim to be, we’re pretty sure that Paul did write I Corinthians. I Corinthians contains the following passage:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (verses 15:3-8).

This isn’t much: no tomb-discovery, no hanging around for forty days to teach, no Doubting Thomas wanting to touch the wounds, no

details of any kind in fact. It's something, however. Paul claims to be an eyewitness to the resurrection appearances (not distinguishing those of the apostles from his Damascus experience) and he at least knew Peter, James, and John (see Gal. 1:18-19, 2:7-14).

This means that Christianity, unlike Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, can claim a major (alleged) miracle not founded in pure hearsay. Still, this is but a small victory for the apologists.

Compare to the case of D. D. Home's levitation. It allegedly occurred in the presence of three associates of Home: Viscount Adare, Lord Lindsay, and Adare's cousin Charles Wynne. We have written statements from all four men: Home mentioned the event in his *Incidents in my Life (Second Series)*. Adare and Lindsay both published multiple written accounts. We also have a letter written from Wynne to Home stating he could "swear to" the levitation. These are not our only eyewitness sources for Home's life or alleged feats, just the only eyewitness sources for this particular feat of Home's. In contrast, we do not have any eyewitness sources for miracles performed by Jesus before the crucifixion, nor do we have eyewitness sources for appearances to persons other than Paul.

I have a hunch that somebody reading this will complain if I just say these documents regarding Home's levitation are authentic, so let's compare their status to that of the gospels. First, there is no reason to suppose that these accounts were originally anonymous. Many other sources attest to their authenticity. I will list and describe only those that I have seen personally:

Carpenter, W. D. "The Fallacies of Testimony in relation to the Supernatural." Pp. 279-295 in *The Contemporary Review*. Volume XXVII. December, 1876-May, 1876. London: Strahan & Co., 1876.

Home, Mme. Dunglas. *D. D. Home: His Life and Mission*. New York: Arno Press, 1976 (reprint of the 1888 edition published by Trübner & Co., London).

Podmore, Frank. *Modern Spiritualism*. Vol. II London: Methuen & Co., 1902.

Houdini, Harry. *A Magician Among the Spirits*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924.

Hall, Trevor H. *The Enigma of Daniel Home*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1984.

Kurtz, Paul. *The Transcendental Temptation*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1986.

D. D. Home: His Life and Mission: This book was written by Home's widow a mere 20 years after the levitation. It is less like the testimony of Papias and Irenaeus, and more like what the gospels would be if they were really written by their traditional authors. It mentions Home's autobiography, and quotes in full the testimony of Adare, Lindsay, and Wynne. It also quotes the article by W. D. Carpenter listed above. This article alleges contradictory testimony coming out of séances, saying "a whole party of believers will affirm that they saw Mr. Home float out of one window and in at another, whilst a single honest skeptic declares that Mr. Home was sitting in his chair the whole time." A bit after this statement it mentions "'levitation of the human body,' confirmed as it is in modern times by the testimony of Mr. Crookes, Lord Lindsay, and Lord Adare." (Crookes was a respected scientist who attempted to examine Home in a laboratory setting). Madame Home understands the reference to the "honest skeptic" to mean that Charles Wynne contradicted Adare and Lindsay. She furthermore mentions a book by an American writer which makes the identification of the "honest skeptic" as Adare's cousin explicit. The challenge of Carpenter, Madame Home says, was what prompted Wynne's letter to Home. She says she has it in front of her as she writes, and reproduces it in full.

Modern Spiritualism: Frank Podmore was a fierce critic of spiritualism, providing a hostile witness to the authenticity of the primary sources (the other sources I will describe from now on are also hostile). Podmore quotes one of Lindsay's accounts, as well as the same account written by Adare quoted by Madame Home. He also quotes a sentence from Wynne's letter, showing no doubts as to its authenticity and refer-

ring to Carpenter's claim as a mere assumption.

A Magician Among the Spirits: Houdini reproduces an account written by Adare in 1920. Houdini seemed to think doing so was necessary to correct inaccurate descriptions of what the witnesses saw.

The Enigma of Daniel Home: Trevor Hall reports the results of a careful investigation into the origins of Viscount Adare's *Experiences in Spiritualism*. Hall argues that it should be dated to 1869 rather than 1870 or '71. He also argues that Adare's father had such an influence on the book's composition that the book should be attributed to the father, not the son. However, he does not deny that the relevant section of *Experiences in Spiritualism* was written by the younger man. I think that if the account was not Adare's, Hall's investigation would have uncovered this. Hall also corroborates the authenticity of statements attributed to Lindsay and Wynne.

The Transcendental Temptation: Kurtz mentions accounts written by Adare and Lindsay, and has brief quotations from both sources.

These are almost certainly not the only sources we have corroborating the authenticity of the accounts of Home's levitation. They are merely the only sources I have bothered to check. In describing their contents in detail, I fear I sound like I am writing an apologetic for Home's feat. I think it's helpful, however, to head off the charge of unfairness in evaluating the sources. Describing the above books also gives an idea of how infinitely superior our non-eyewitness sources for Home are to our non-eyewitness sources for Jesus. This is not a complete picture, of course. Those interested in a fuller one might try reading Trevor Hall's book, which contains detailed information for the sources on Home's life.

The fact that we have much better sources for Home's (almost certainly fraudulent) feat than for Jesus' feat is an excellent reason to reject the latter. It cannot be protested that we have better evidence against Home, because the reasons for having better evidence for are the same as the reasons for having better evidence against. Here, remember that the evidence against Home is perhaps not as strong as the evidence

against Eusapia Palladino: it would be nice if someone had caught Home in the act of trying to fake a levitation. Much of the reason for being skeptical of Home, though, is that he was never subjected to the level of scrutiny that brought down so many other mediums.

Furthermore, the presence of good sources for the event itself can contribute to the case of those who seek an alternative explanation. To give only a more obvious example: Paul Kurtz highlights the fact that Home instructed the witnesses to “on no account leave your places.” Kurtz remarks that this is “reminiscent of Moses’ warning to the children of Israel never to climb the mountain... or of Joseph Smith’s warning to his disciples not to look into the box containing the Golden Bible.”²⁴

I could repeat all this with, say, the sources for alien abduction claims, but I see no need.²⁵ My point has been made: our sources for modern paranormal claims are far superior to our sources for Jesus.

Many apologists, however, are unfazed by the lack of eyewitness sources. William Lane Craig occasionally argues that John was at least written by students of John the disciple,²⁶ but when he debated scholar Gerd Lüdemann he insisted he could make his case without the gospels being eyewitness sources rather than defend their eyewitness status.²⁷ Gary Habermas seems to rely almost entirely on I Corinthians. These writers, often cited as the best living defenders of the resurrection, effectively concede the issue of who wrote the gospels, but think they can make their case anyway. We’ll see about that.

Further Reflections

In the first chapter, I argued that our information on modern miracle claims strongly suggests that ancient ones are *equally* bogus. This chapter raises a similar broad issue. Spiritualism has made attempts at becoming a full-fledged religion, and cults have sprung up around UFO belief. However, such modern superstitions have been less successful than the mainstream religions, in spite of the fact that they can claim better evidence than any of them. Why?

At first I thought this might be a fluke of history. However, I suspect

the problem is that religions simply cannot flourish when too much will be known about their origins. As a rule, when believers are in a position to produce positive documentation, skeptics will be able to record embarrassing facts that will make it impossible for the religion to thrive. This is why the best-documented miracle claim of a modern religion (the resurrection) still has weaker evidence than many readily dismissed claims.

The one possible counter-example that might be given here is the case of Mormonism. Today there are millions of believing Mormons, in spite of much evidence suggesting that Joseph Smith was a fraud.²⁸ And even though Smith operated under the eye of modernity, he got three people to sign a statement saying that God himself told them the Book of the Mormon was authentic, and that an angel had shown them its golden plates.²⁹ However, this is still a trifle compared to the miracles claimed by the larger religions. Working in the modern world, Smith couldn't get away with very much.

Chapter 4

The Pace Of Legendary Development



In the assumption that the gospels are non-eyewitness sources written within seven or eight decades of Jesus' death, it makes sense to think that they contain a mix of history and legend. This is the view of mainline Biblical scholars. The most famous (or infamous) version of this approach is that of the Jesus Seminar, who labeled a mere 2% of the words of Jesus in the gospels as being definitely from Jesus, with another 16% being probably from him. More curious assessments exist, however. Wolphart Pannenberg defends the historicity of the resurrection as staunchly as the evangelical apologists I am dealing with here, but has no qualms about referring to "the legend of Jesus' virgin birth."¹ Raymond Brown expresses serious doubts about the Bethlehem stories, but on the virgin birth, says "*scientifically controllable* biblical evidence leaves the question of the historicity of the virginal conception unresolved" but there is "better evidence for historicity than against."²

Though scholars like Brown demonstrate a naïve embrace of the supernatural, they are right to think that the gospels do have some historical value, in spite of being hearsay. Consider the parallel case of Apollonius of Tyana. We have no eyewitness accounts of his life, but we are not unable to know anything about him. Our earliest mention of him is Lucian's passing reference to "the notorious Apollonius" and

“his whole bag of tricks” in the context of supernatural fraud.³ This reference comes perhaps eight decades after Apollonius’ death, and our first full account of his allegedly miraculous life (Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius*) does not come until the following century. These aren’t the best sources, but they are enough to support the conclusion that Apollonius was a magician. Of course, they do nothing to support the conclusion that Apollonius had actual supernatural powers.

With Jesus our sources are closer in time to the events recorded, and therefore allow greater confidence in drawing conclusions about Jesus’ life—something I will be doing in the following chapter. However, they remain hearsay, and not even in the sense of being secondhand. Most of the information they contain likely passed through an unknown number of retellings before finally being committed to paper. This makes the books utterly worthless when it comes to trying to establish actual miracles, a point which I think should be obvious.

In Michael Shermer’s *Why People Believe Weird Things*, a book that looks at psychics, alien abductions, creationism, and holocaust denial, there is a chapter of 25 ways people’s thinking tends to go wrong. One subject heading is “Rumors Do Not Equal Reality.” This point takes up exactly one 6” by 9” page, and consists of little more than a list of urban legends followed by an insistence that “none of them are true.”⁴ Such a statement, I suppose, would seem a little dogmatic if any of the tales were matters of serious debate in our society. However, in most situations, people today only need a gentle reminder in order to be cautious about third-hand reports.

The land of Christian apologetics does not seem to be “most situations.” They insist that there is not a big enough gap between Jesus’ death and the penning of the gospel reports to allow for the gospels to contain legendary developments. Such arguments must seem somewhat absurd, especially in light of what has already been said about the birth narratives. Nevertheless, these claims appear prominently in the apologetic literature. Lee Strobel made the argument central to his book *The Case for Christ*,⁵ and it is the main point used to support the reliability of the New Testament in Norman Geisler’s *Baker Encyclo-*

pedia of Christian Apologetics.⁶ Therefore, I will look at the arguments in some detail.

How Fast do Legends Form?

The argument made to show that the gospels cannot contain legends is that in many other cases, legends have taken longer to develop. Craig Blomberg has argued that the gospels do well when compared to our earliest biographies of Alexander the Great, written over four hundred years after the fact.⁷ William Lane Craig has cited two authors, theologian Julius Müller and Roman historian A. N. Sherwin-White. Craig says that Sherwin-White specifically concluded “for the gospels to be legends, the rate of legendary accumulation would have to be ‘unbelievable.’ More generations would be needed” (supposedly, the requisite number of generations is two). Müller challenged scholars in the 19th century to find a single example of a series of legends developing that fast, and Craig claims this challenge has never been met.⁸

I’ll deal with the flimsiest claim first. There’s a good reason why historians are willing to trust our earliest surviving biographies of Alexander the Great, in spite of their dates of composition: they were based on much earlier sources. For example, the second-century writer Arrian, in the preface to his *Anabasis*, explains that he is working from accounts written by two men who accompanied Alexander on his expedition, Aristobulus and Ptolemy. It should be no surprise to anyone that it is possible to write good history 500 years after the fact if the historian has eyewitness sources. Indeed, twenty-five hundred years will be no barrier to good history when good sources are available. This does not guarantee that anything written within twenty-five hundred years of an event will be true.

Note, on the other hand claims such as Arrian’s are still not 100% guarantees. Philostratus claimed to have based his account of Apollonius’ life on an account of a disciple of Apollonius named Damis. But some elements of Philostratus’ account naturally make historians skeptical, as when Apollonius supposedly appeared to Damis in Di-caearchia the evening after he defended himself before the emperor

in Rome. Damis at first thought he was seeing a ghost. Once he had confirmed that Apollonius was physically there, he wondered at how he had made the journey so quickly, since the journey from Rome to Dicaearchia had taken Damis two days. Apollonius explained that he had had some divine aid, though of what sort, exactly, he does not specify. At least that is the story as Philostratus records it.⁹

What, though, of the claim that legends still take a couple of generations? The obvious example to bring up here is urban legends.

On September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda operatives crashed two airplanes into the World Trade Towers, bringing them crashing to the ground. On September 25, the *New York Times* reported that a legend had been going around about a police officer who surfed a wave of debris to safety, all the way from the 82nd story.

Fourteen days. A touch shorter than the gap between Jesus' death and the writing of the gospels. Furthermore, this is just one example. The urban legend debunking website Snopes.com ended up devoting an entire page to Sept. 11th-related rumors. It looks as if the answer to the question of "how long do legends take to form?" is best answered with another question: "how long does it take to re-tell a story?"

It is hardly an excuse to say that the apologetic literature I cite is pre-2001. Urban legends have been around much longer, and some clearly formed in a matter of years. Here are some examples taken from John A. Williams' book *The Cost of Deception*, on legends that took hold in the modern Christian community:

- Since at least the eighties, rumors have circulated about social security checks that mention a mark on the "forehead or hand," a clear reference to the mark of the Beast in Revelation. None of these stories have held up to scrutiny. Since Social Security was created in 1935, it is safe to say that this legend took less than two generations to form.
- When Williams looks at the already mentioned "scientists drill to hell story" he concludes it was based on an actual drilling expedition in 1984. The story first surfaced in 1989, making the time of formation 5 years.

- In 1974, two small-time broadcasters filed a petition to curtail special considerations given to religious groups when handing out licenses for educational TV and radio stations. Within a year, this had gotten twisted around into a claim that prominent atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair was trying to ban religious programming from the airways.

William Lane Craig, at least, cannot claim ignorance here. In *Reasonable Faith*, published in 1994, he actually mentions the problem of urban legends, and then dismisses it with a single sentence: "the earliest Christians would have passed on the Jesus traditions with the care and respect for that tradition which was typical of Jewish transmission of traditions, which renders analogies drawn from folk literature or 'urban legends' irrelevant."¹⁰ In most of his other work, interestingly, he makes his claims about the rate of legendary development while ignoring urban legends.¹¹ But when he does address the issue, he effectively drops his usual claims and asserts, without so much as a footnote of support, that Jews had a special immunity to apocryphal tales.

This is a highly dubious assumption. As I show below, people are far too often less than careful in evaluating extraordinary claims, so we should be leery of accepting such claims on the assumption that one particular group of people was particularly careful. Any such assumption must be based on speculation, given that the writers of the gospel do not say how the traditions they record were preserved. Furthermore, I have already mentioned examples of legends that suggest that Jews and early Christians had no special legend-immunity: Josephus and Papias. In the case of Josephus, it may be that not all the portents he lists are legends. The sword-shaped star may have been an instance of misperception of an ordinary star, akin to a UFO report. But the numerous other things he claims stand as solid evidence that Jews did in fact believe legends surrounding recent events. When confronted with Papias' Fat Judas yarn, the apologist must claim that Christians carefully handed down their traditions for the first six decades or so after Jesus' death and then quickly became careless in the decade or two after that. Why this should be so I have no idea.

If all these examples are not enough, numerous other instances of rapid legend formation have been found. In 1991, Robert M. Price specifically responded to apologetic claims with numerous examples of legends growing up within the lifetime of a person. One example is the case of the 17th century messianic figure, Sabbatai Sevi, who was said to have come surrounded in a fiery cloud. Another was a set of legends uncovered by the author of a book about Charles Manson. Manson was said to have, among other things, once levitated a bus.¹² Price's analysis, though, didn't keep Lee Strobel from claiming that the response to Müller's argument was a "resounding silence"—seven years after Price's original article.¹³

It would be tedious to repeat Price's entire list, and I could add to it if I wanted. I will mention just one more example. When reading the work of a historian writing in the early 60's, I encountered a reference to the "remarkable growth of myth" about Alexander the Great "within the lifetime of contemporaries."¹⁴

The historian's name, for those who are curious, is A. N. Sherwin-White.

This requires some explanation. Sherwin-White was the author of a book on how Roman society and law appears in the New Testament. At the end, he has a few pages on the rate of legendary growth. In it, he cites a case from Herodotus where a legend had developed regarding the overthrow of a tyrant and Herodotus uncovered the truth a couple of generations after the fact. In a footnote at the end, he mentions that another scholar suggested the situation with Alexander the Great was less encouraging, but Sherwin-White responds that Arrian was able to write a reliable history based on two sources that survived until the second century A.D.

What conclusion he draws from this is not clear. At first he says it "suggests that even two generations are too short a span to allow the mythical tendency to prevail over the hard core of historic oral tradition," but then says that "falsification does not automatically and absolutely prevail."¹⁵ The first statement seems to say legends will never prevail in so short a time, while the second merely suggests that they

won't always. Whatever he thought, he clearly proved only the second. Two examples show only what *can* happen. They do not show what will *always* happen.

Craig's own source proves him wrong. Sherwin-White concedes that the "rate of legendary development" can be quite fast, and merely argues that the truth can be uncovered in spite of legends. However, there is no proof that this will happen in every case. In fact, we can be pretty sure that it won't always happen. A legend, by definition, is something that some people do believe.

Lee Strobel introduced what I consider further falsehood into the situation when he claimed that Sherwin-White "meticulously examined" the subject of legendary development. One example in the body of the text and one in a foot note is not "meticulous." Worse still, Sherwin-White ignored the many fairly recent legends in Herodotus, such as the story of the temple at Delphi miraculously defending itself with simultaneous lighting and an avalanche.¹⁶

Ironically, Christian apologists have given an example of quite rapid embellishment of a claim. They have shown, by their treatment of Sherwin-White's argument, that a single retelling is enough to introduce a significant distortion into a statement, and two retellings may introduce two. Now we see the wisdom of being skeptical of even secondhand accounts!

How do Legends Form?

Those used to imagining legends as stories such as Homer's *Odyssey*, forming over many, many retellings, may be puzzled to find out how quickly some legends have sprung up. This mystification disappears once the mechanisms of legend formation are understood.

First, let's be frank: people lie. Suspecting that the accounts of Jesus' life may contain outright lies does not require thinking that the disciples lied, or even that the authors of the books lied. If each author used several unknown sources, each who may have had more than one source themselves, and so on down the line, that's a lot of people who had the opportunity to introduce lies into the story of Jesus' life. The

problem with trusting a story that's passed through many retellings is not just that it might have gotten enhanced a little each time. The problem is also that the number of opportunities for a single, large instance of outright fabrication increases with each link in the chain of transmission. I can think of no other plausible account of how the bogus genealogies of Jesus came to be.

This is not to say that every embellishment was conscious. One problem that few people are aware of is the fallibility of human memory. It is not just that we forget, we also change and add to the details of our memories. Psychological experiments have shown that it is trivially easy to fudge the details of an event with leading questions. "Did you see the video footage?" may get people to remember seeing footage that never existed. Worse, both real-life instances and experiments to generate mildly traumatic false memories (like being lost in a mall) show that sufficiently aggressive questioning can create a false memory of an event in a person's life.¹⁷

A stunning example of this problem comes from Andre Kole's book *Miracles or Magic* which, like his on-campus performance, attacks non-Christian claims while defending Jesus' miracles:

I enjoy listening to people try to describe some of my illusions. Once when I was in Madras, India, I appeared to cause my daughter to float within the framework of a large pyramid. The next day, a waitress excitedly told me what some of her customers had said about my show. According to them, I had not only levitated my daughter, but I also had caused her to float out over the audience, turn in a large circle, and do several impossible gymnastic feats. Of course, when people exaggerate my illusions, it's hard to tell them that I really wasn't that good.¹⁸

This is one of several points Kole makes to show that reports of the supernatural are often inaccurate or exaggerated. Later in the book, when it comes time to defend Jesus' miracles, Kole simply assumes that the gospel accounts are accurate. How he could make such an assumption, given what he knows, is beyond me. With such distortions occurring in eyewitness reports a short time after the fact, just think

what can happen when people try to remember stories they merely heard!

Significant lies and exaggerations do not require years. They can happen in a single retelling. Once this is understood, the various legends documented above become considerably less surprising.

Would Legends be Debunked?

Arguably more interesting than the dubious appeals to authority discussed earlier is apparently common-sense to the effect that so long as eyewitnesses were alive, facts could be checked and legends debunked. If Christians failed to check facts, then at least their enemies would—at least, that’s what we might expect at first glance.

First question: Would the early Christians have had an interest in critically examining the things they heard?

It seems natural to assume that the answer is “yes.” We tend to assume other people are like us, and also that we’re rational people, refusing to accept extraordinary claims like those in the Bible without critically examining them.

But there may be an ironic side to this line of thinking. When a modern person argues for the truth of the Bible because, hey, people in the first century must have examined its claims skeptically, there is a refusal to be as skeptical as one could be. One can easily imagine early believers were not as skeptical as modern apologists would like to believe, reasoning, in, say, 70 A.D. that people in 40 A.D. must have critically examined the claims, leading the people in 70 A.D. to exercise little skepticism.

The truth is, though, that people frequently fail to think critically without any particular rationale. They do so frequently, and they do so under some of the most incredible circumstances. Examples could be drawn from every category of bogus claim mentioned in the first chapter. I’ll limit myself to talking about just two examples which, though artificial, nicely parallel each other.

The first is the case of the Great Carlos, in 1988. At the time, there was a great deal of interest in Australia in channeling, which are claims

of being possessed by ancient spirits who can impart wisdom or what-not. An Australian TV station approached James Randi about doing something to make people more skeptical of the claim. Randi came up with the idea of creating a channeler from scratch. The TV station wanted to use an actor at first, but Randi wanted to show that anyone could do it, so he picked his friend Jose Alvarez.

With some time spent watching videos of channelers and using a simple magician's trick to temporarily stop his pulse (which a doctor would check when Alvarez got "taken over" by the spirit of Carlos), Alvarez was able to put on an act that the Australian media gobbled up. They even failed to check an entirely bogus lists of past appearances of Carlos. One phone call could have unraveled the whole thing, but theoretically respectable outlets of journalism never made that one call. The hoax was eventually revealed to the embarrassment of every outlet except Channel 9, the one that had helped put the thing together.¹⁹

Now compare this to the results of a more formal experiment performed by psychologists Barry Singer and Victor Benassi. They dressed an actor and amateur magician named Craig in a purple choir robe and had him do simple magic tricks for groups of psychology students—reading numbers blindfolded, making ashes materialize through a volunteer's hand, bending a metal rod by having the class chant. Different classes were introduced in different ways: some were told he claimed to have psychic powers, some were told he would do magic tricks, and a third set, as followup experiment, was given an introduction that tried to make absolutely clear what he was doing was just magic tricks.

Once the demonstrations were over, some students sat stunned in their chairs, while others ran up to Craig to ask him to teach them to perform such feats. The experimenters comment: "Although in retrospect we might have known better, we did not imagine that having someone dress in a choir robe and do elementary-school magic tricks would produce such fright." Afterwards, when the psychologists asked the students if they thought Craig had real supernatural powers, 77% of those who were told he claimed to have psychic powers said "yes."

What's surprising is that those who were told he'd be doing magic tricks were only slightly less credulous. The first such group had a rate of belief of 65%, and even when the psychologists went back to make absolutely clear what was going on, 58% remained believers.

In a further follow up, new students were given a description of the routine and a questionnaire that asked if they thought Craig had real powers. 58% said yes. Then the questionnaire asked if what he did could be accomplished through trickery, and if they wanted to change their mind about Craig's powers based on their answer. Almost all agreed what Craig did could have been tricks, but belief in him dropped only a few percentage points. A second question asked how many alleged psychics are really magicians. The consensus was three-quarters, but after this question, a majority of the psychology students (52%) still thought Craig was the genuine article. In other words, people continued to believe in him even after being led through the reasoning process that would suggest he was probably a fake.²⁰

It would seem, based on these two experiments, that many people will more readily believe an extraordinary lie than a mundane truth.

I could give even more outlandish examples, though I worry about painting too dark a portrait of human credulity. As Carl Sagan once said, one doesn't really want to end up a "crotchety misanthrope, convinced that nonsense is ruling the world" – even if there is much evidence to support such a view.²¹ It is, I suppose, good to recognize the rays of wisdom that shine through even the most credulous setting: the learned skeptics of antiquity, the priest who took the time to investigate the Shroud of Turin, the lone protesters against the witch crazes. I recently had the pleasure of reading, in Christopher Hitchens' book *God is not Great*, how Aristophanes wrote a play in which his contemporary Socrates refuted the superstitious farmer who thought rain could only be explained by Zeus, and how even a hundred years before Socrates, the philosopher Pythagoras refuted astrology on the grounds that twins do not have the same fate.²² However, we should at the same time recognize the folly of accepting extraordinary claims on the mere assumption that someone else has critically examined them.

The general intelligence of humanity is not that dependable.

Unfortunately, as bad as the situation can be today, I have to point out that it was probably worse in the ancient world. A little care is needed in making this evaluation: it can be argued that extraordinary examples of ancient credulity does not prove the situation was worse back then, because extraordinary examples can be cited from today. However, I think that on close examination the ancient examples turn out to be worse than the modern ones. For example, it has been observed that some of the stories that turn up in the modern angel literature contain no clear supernatural element; rather, they involve the narrator arbitrarily deciding that a helpful stranger must have been divine.²³ At first glance, this recalls the deification of Paul by the superstitious ancients in Acts 14:8-20 and Acts 28:1-6.²⁴ However, in Acts this is not a random, one-time incident, but something he had to deal with twice in his career. Also, it involved not lone eccentrics but entire crowds. True, Paul had to heal a man and survive a snakebite, but modern faith healers claim similar feats without ever having to worry about being deified by a crowd that's seen them for the first time. (I'll be saying more about such healings in the next chapter). Also, in the Acts 14 incident the crowd decided Paul's companion Barnabas too was a god, and Barnabas hadn't done anything!

Such bizarre behavior as is described in Acts boggles the mind, but it becomes somewhat less surprising once one considers the factors that often cause modern people to swallow fantastic nonsense. In his book on urban legends, John A. Williams gives several reasons why his fellow Christians could today be vulnerable to tales about scientists drilling to Hell. One is especially relevant: "They fit into our worldview."²⁵ Today, this is the worldview of only one strain of Christianity, and there is a secular, scientific worldview from which such stories appear obviously absurd. In the ancient world, however, while some better-educated people would deny the miraculous on philosophical grounds, there was no science like we have today and thus no scientific worldview. If a god or gods are your explanation for sunrises, for lighting, for the seasons, why not believe such beings could come down in human form,

walk on water, and rise from the dead?

If the early Christians weren't going to be critically examining the claims of their religion, at least legends would be kept in check by others, right? This is a somewhat more reasonable proposition on the face of it, but I think it's also wrong for several reasons.

The first reason is a simple lack of interest in debunking Christianity. The reason some people today are willing to put effort into debunking claims of UFO abduction and the like is that claimants manage to get exposure in sensationalistic media outlets, something for which there was no precise equivalent in the Roman era. Furthermore, debunking requires a special attitude where no claim is too silly to be critically examined. This is an attitude by no means shared by all today (remember the newspaper comment about machine-gunning butterflies), and few would be likely to hold it in the early years of Christianity. Lucian wrote an exposé, but he felt no need to do so for every claim; ridicule would do.

Our early sources for outside opinions of Christianity aren't as abundant as we'd like, but they tend to reinforce the idea that outsiders wouldn't have much interest in debunking Christian miracle claims. There is only one non-Christian source from the first century referring to Jesus, the Jewish historian Josephus. Unfortunately, it comes only in 90 A.D. Also, the text was undoubtedly tampered with by later Christian scribes because it refers to Jesus as the Messiah, a statement totally inconsistent with Josephus' other stated views. For this reason, it's hard to know the exact attitudes of people towards Christianity in the first decades after Jesus' death. That there are no surviving non-Christian mentions of Christianity, though, suggests a lack of interest.

When we turn to the early second century, we get a picture of pagan opponents who saw no need to debunk Christianity. One very early source is Tacitus, who tells of how Nero blamed Christians for the burning of Rome in order to deflect the blame away from himself. This persecution, it seems, was conducted not because Christians were a threat but because they were an easy target, not the sort of thing anybody needed to debunk. Similarly, Pliny the Younger, in a letter to

Emperor Trajan, dismisses Christianity as a “depraved superstition,” again showing no interest in debunking it.

As we move farther into the second century, we do begin to see anti-Christian polemic. One example is in *The Death of Pergrinius*, by the same Lucian who wrote the exposé of Alexander. The book is not mainly focused on Christianity though, but on a man named Pergrinius, who was so mad for glory that he burnt himself alive in public. Pergrinius had been a Christian for some time, though, so Lucian spends time attacking Christianity. There are no revelations of the sort contained in *The False Prophet*, however. Rather, he ridicules their beliefs, and then mentions that they got them “traditionally, without any definite evidence.”²⁶ To Lucian’s mind, it seems there was nothing to debunk in the same way that he debunked Alexander.

The Death of Pergrinius also suggest another reason for not spending too much energy debunking popular cults: the masses were hopelessly superstitious, at least in Lucian’s view. Lucian gets quite a few laughs at their expense, for example, by starting rumors of amazing portents accompanying Pergrinius’ suicide. Lucian seemed to think that superstition could be attacked for the benefit of the educated, but the common people were hopeless. Pliny may well have been thinking the same when he called Christianity a “depraved superstition.”

Later in the second century, we see a full-fledged attempt at refuting Christianity, *The True Doctrine* by a man named Celsus. The book does not survive, but we have a pretty good idea of what Celsus said thanks to a point-by-point refutation by the church father Origen. It does not seem, however, that Celsus had any real idea of what really happened. For example, he proposes the virgin birth story was told to cover up the fact of Jesus’ illegitimacy. This seems unlikely given that Mark was probably written first (something Celsus probably hadn’t figured out) and Mark makes no mention of the virgin birth but does seem to take for granted that Jesus came from a typical family (see Mark 6:3, for example).

It is no surprise that Celsus would get something like this wrong, since in Celsus’ day the time to unearth evidence against Christian-

ity's miracles had long passed. To explain this point, let me bring in an analogy with a group known in the UFO literature as "contactees." My knowledge of them has improved (somewhat) since I first drafted this section.²⁷ Originally, I knew them only through the occasional footnote in more recent UFO literature, and could only comment on my lack of knowledge and lack of any idea on how to go about getting more information, especially for the purpose of doing a contemporary debunking. It still seems to me that they have largely been forgotten today, and this is a barrier to learning about them.

In spite of this, I have found some evidence that two figures in the movement, George Adamski and Daniel Fry, were guilty of faking photographs and video footage. The sources were found with the help of an academic anthology on the contactee movement called *The Gods Have Landed*,²⁸ a work I found purely by luck when looking for some other books on UFOs in my university's massive research library. The other books I had been looking for, by the way, didn't turn out to be very useful. Such is the beauty of the call number system: if you find one book on a subject, when you go to the shelves to grab it, you always find other good books on the subject.

More strange is the nature of the evidence: it came from what would otherwise be considered quite credulous sources. For Adamski, it was an article in *Fate* magazine, by an author who seemed to see nothing implausible in Adamski's claims, while also seeming to accept that they were false in their totality. The *Fate* article did, however, cite authors who argued Adamski did experience genuine contacts with extraterrestrials even though he was given to some fabrication.

In the case of Fry, once I had his name I was able to find the website of one Sean Donovan, who described himself as in the process of writing a biography of Fry. The site had four pages dedicated to controversies involving Fry. One presents detailed analysis showing that Fry's UFO videos were faked. None of the pages ever really get around to addressing the question of whether he actually made contact with aliens. However, the one on the videos opens with a quote from a book titled *Alien Base*, which says, "I have always been dubious about the authenticity of Fry's

16mm films of UFOs... But does this prove that Fry was lying about all his previous experiences? I think not. Most probably, he thought that a few fabricated movie films of 'saucers' would bolster his unprovable claims." Donovan does not challenge this reasoning.³⁰

Not the normal sources one goes to for skeptical information on UFOs. I found myself reading them because the claims were not believed by enough people to attract the attention of aggressive debunkers. Notice that here I do not really have enough to sway those few hardcore believers in the 1950's contacts who still exist today. Indeed, I can do nothing at all to sway those who have already decided that Adamski and Fry were dishonest only occasionally.

Now let's transport ourselves back to the first century. In that age, the libraries were not remotely comparable to our modern ones. The printing presses that fill our modern ones did not exist. There were no archives of periodicals, indeed no periodicals at all.

There were no public records against which legends could be checked. There was also none of the quicker modern forms of transportation, no telecommunication, no postal system—a serious problem for a skeptic living not in Jerusalem but, say, Rome, Corinth, or Galatia. Thus, the task of finding information on the origins of an obscure religious group a few decades after its founding would go from tricky to probably impossible. Even if someone thought Christianity worth trying to debunk prior to Josephus' first passing reference to the cult, the problems describe here would ensure they never got very far.

What if Legends Were Debunked?

In spite of the lack of recorded 1st century attempts to debunk Christian miracle claims, it remains possible that legends would be challenged from time to time. Let us suppose, for a moment, that on a few occasions legends were challenged with powerful contrary evidence. Would this put an end to them?

Probably not. The world of modern bogus claims contains many examples of claims that people kept on believing in spite of their debunking. John Williams reports how when one believer was confronted with

evidence that the Madalyn Murray O'Hair legend mentioned earlier was bogus, she suspected a cover-up. After all, Williams remarks, "it was on the internet."³¹ He also tells of a legend that Proctor & Gamble's insignia was Satanic. The company took extensive steps to quash the legend, including enlisting the help of major Christian leaders such as Jerry Falwell, but some modern Christians kept telling the story all the same.³²

Two more examples come from already discussed hoaxes: the Fox sisters and the Amityville Horror. The confession of the Fox sisters not only failed to put an end to spiritualism in general, it did not keep hard-core spiritualists from believing in the powers of the Fox sisters. Even though they had demonstrated their techniques, true believers insisted the confession was coerced or some such.

In the case of the Amityville Horror, the problem seems to be not so much that people refused to believe it was a hoax, but that people failed to spread the word well enough. For example, when the movie version was remade in 2005, more than one person involved in making the film went on the record as saying they were attracted to the story because it was true.³³ Oops.

The astonishing failure of some people to recognize the Amityville Horror as a hoax has a sort of personal immediacy for me because once when I mentioned the case in a blog post, I got an anonymous comment troll who claimed to find the idea that the Amityville Horror was a hoax was hilarious and the idea could entirely be blamed on somebody named Steven Kaplan.

I went back to do further research, and discovered that, yes, a writer named Steven Kaplan had written an attack on the authenticity of the story. However, the questions that had been raised about the story could hardly be all attributed to Kaplan. When attorney William Weber confessed his part in the charade, the confession was reported everywhere from *Skeptical Inquirer* to *People* magazine. (I managed to get copies of articles from both publications for my personal files.)³⁴

I also found a copy of an article by Frank Zindler that appeared in *American Atheist*, which heavily excerpted from the trial transcript

of a lawsuit between Weber and writer Paul Hoffman on one side and the Lutzes on the other side, over who would get the money from the book sales and movie rights. The transcript showed that while on the stand, George Lutz engaged in a fair amount of backpedaling and some comical hedging with regards to the truth of the story that had been printed. For example: Did he see the image of a demonic pig staring into his daughter's window? Well, he did see a shape. But did he see a demonic pig? When questioned by a lawyer under oath, Lutz had to admit the answer was "no."³⁵

At this point, instead of asking how people got the notion that the Amityville is a hoax, it's worth asking how anyone could become so willing to readily dismiss the idea that it is. Though I haven't looked at every possible answer, I suspect much of the blame falls on Ed and Lorraine Warren, self-described "psychic researchers" who were involved in a séance at the Lutz' house after the Lutz' left, and who declared the haunting genuine. Their website (warrens.net) portrays hoax accusations as "rumors": "How these rumors started and how they became so ubiquitous is unclear. . . It's believed that the hoax rumor began with a man who called himself Dr. Steven Kaplan. . . Another rumor persists that the Lutz's lawyer, Attorney Weber, fabricated the story with them over several bottles of wine." The fact that Weber's confession has been widely reported is simply ignored. I can only conclude that the Warrens, in my opinion, made a conscious decision to deceive their readers in order to avoid embarrassment over having endorsed a hoax. A lie is kept alive with nothing more complicated than another lie—though it is interesting to note here that the people keeping the story alive are not the original hoaxers. Once a claim gets rolling, third parties can end up making an investment in it that they will not readily give up.

A third example from the hoax category is the case of crop circles. Around 1980, journalists in England began noticing strange circular depressions out in farm field. For a decade the phenomenon was taken quite seriously. Many people, calling themselves "cereologists," tried to study the circles closely. Some of their books became best sellers. Some proposed explanations that seemed to be in line with mainstream

science: vortices, plasma balls. Others insisted something more mysterious was going on, and talked of extraterrestrial visitors and ley lines. Similar circles began to show up in other parts of the world. Then, in 1991, Doug Bower and Dave Chorley came forward and confessed they had been making the things for fifteen years, and, like the Fox sisters, gave a demonstration of their techniques. However, hard-core “cereologists,” like the hard-core spiritualists before them, kept on believing.³⁶ Fifteen years after the hoax was confessed we have the strange situation where a Google search kicks up, as its top four items, one site by enthusiastic circle-artists and three put up by “researchers” who come off as only dimly aware of the possibility of human creation.³⁷

On top of this, though modern skeptics often complain that their critiques of extraordinary claims get little attention in sensationalistic media outlets, the ancient situation was probably worse. However, even if it doesn’t happen as often as they’d like, the skeptics’ views still do get a fair amount of circulation through TV and the printing press. On top of this, the Internet has made it possible for anyone to set up a rumor-debunking site such as Snopes.com. Lucian’s *Alexander the False Prophet* shows that debunking books could be written in the ancient era, but they were far more difficult to circulate. Copies had to be made by hand rather than rushed off by the hundreds on a printing press.

The lack of print would tilt the scales against skeptics: a large network of dedicated believers could spread the story by word of mouth, without ever taking the time to put pen to paper. In contrast, skeptics, who could not make disbelief in a particular cult the center of their lives, would have a much harder time spreading the word about the truth of a particular story. Without authoritative documentation such as newspaper reports, it would be one person’s word against another’s; believers could be forgiven for not switching sides after hearing such a debate. Also, oral transmission is not the best technique when one wants to spread *accurate* information.


Summary

In short, legends can form in the length of time between Jesus' death and the writing of the gospels. From examination of modern cases, we know that legends and hoaxes are not always as scrutinized as well as they should be, nor are debunkings as effective as we might like. However, the situation in the ancient world would be, in many respects, worse.

Remember, in saying this, I am not arguing that the Gospels contain no historical information at all. I am simply saying that whenever we encounter miracle stories, we should generally prefer the legend hypothesis to the hypothesis of an actual miracle. This is nothing more than common sense; once again, I defend it at length only because apologists try so hard to erase the sense of their readers.

Chapter 5

Miracles During Jesus' Life

he miracles attributed to Jesus pre-crucifixion appear only occasionally in Christian apologetics, greatly dwarfed by discussion of the resurrection. I discuss it, though, for two reasons. First, the miracles of Jesus, and their analogues in the modern day, are an interesting subject in their own right. Also, Christian apologists will sometimes claim that after the crucifixion, the disciples would not have been in a particular mindset, and therefore that mindset cannot explain the stories of Jesus' resurrection. Such arguments are generally based on the assumption that gospels tell the truth when they say, for example, that the disciples were not expecting the resurrection in spite of Jesus' repeated predictions of it (Mark 9:31-32). Why they would not believe this after supposedly seeing Jesus walk on water, raise the dead, and so forth is never explained. It is worth trying to find a more likely scenario.

In discussing the mindset of Jesus' disciples, it is worth briefly sketching the nature of his ministry in general. Though lay readers tend to gloss over the relevant verses, scholars have long noted that in the first three gospels, Jesus seems to say that the world will end within his lifetime. The phrase "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," which we associate with modern end-times kooks, is attributed to Jesus in Matthew 4:7. In Mark 9:1, Jesus says, "Truly, I tell you, there are some

standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.” Mark 13 contains a long discourse on the end of the world, and again Jesus says, “This generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” The disciples were to have an important role in this: Matthew 19:28 (and Luke 22:30) says that “when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” (Apparently he didn’t see the Judas thing coming.) In II Peter 3:4 (probably not written by Peter), we see that early Christians were troubled when Jesus failed to come back right away.¹

In Matthew 12:28 (and Luke 11:20), Jesus explicitly links his miracles to his apocalyptic preaching. So what was going on with those?

Was Jesus a Magician?

The suspicion that Jesus engaged in trickery has appeared quite attractive to people today who are familiar with fraud, including Paul Kurtz and Robert Sheaffer.² Both have noted Celsus’ allegation that Jesus’ miracles were similar to those of other wonder-workers of his day. Kurtz has argued some elements of the story of Lazarus’ resurrection raise the suspicion of fraud. I should also say that the changing of water into wine is suspicious; it isn’t hard to imagine switching one for the other, and the story features Jesus giving quite specific instructions to servants, the way a magician would have to do for a trick.

I, however, do not think that Jesus was a magician. It is a mistake to think Celsus’ work is in anyway comparable to a contemporary debunking. As I noted in the last chapter, he wrote far too long after the death of Jesus to be in a position to know what really happened. As for the two rather suspicious miracles, they occur only in the later book of John. I am inclined to regard them as later additions to Jesus’ story, inconsistent with our larger picture of a man whose main miracles could be “accomplished” without any conscious trickery.

Faith Healing

Take a closer look at the miracle stories of the gospels. Healings and exorcisms appear again and again. We are even told of scenes where Jesus performed many such feats in one sitting. In contrast, we aren't told that Jesus went around transmuting liquids wherever he went. The main duplicated miracle outside healings and exorcisms is the feeding of the multitude (Mark 6:37-44 and Mark 8:1-10), but these stories are so very similar that they seem to be a duplication of what was originally one account. The feeding of the multitude is also the miracle most likely to have been borrowed from stories told about other miracle workers: It closely parallels a feat attributed to Elisha in II Kings chapter 4.

It is not really hard to see how Jesus could have convinced people of his miraculous healing powers. All it takes is a little knowledge of modern faith healing and its close cousin, medical quackery.

It should be kept in mind that some faith healers have indeed indulged in trickery. Peter Popoff, for example, was caught using a radio transceiver to gain "miraculous" knowledge of what was ailing people who came to his events.³ However, such a device would be of little help when it comes to convincing people that a disease has been cured rather than merely divined. So how do they do it?

In the 1970's, medical doctor William Nolen investigated a number of faith healers and reported his findings in *Healing: A Doctor in Search of a Miracle*.⁴ His first target was Kathryn Kuhlman, whose "healing crusades" lasted from the 40's until her death in 1976. In the book, Nolen describes how she would shout out names of diseases being healed, and inevitably, someone in the audience would have the disease and claim to be healed. At one point in the service Nolen attended, Kuhlman declared, "Someone with a brace... a brace on your leg... you don't need that brace anymore. Take it off, come to the stage, and claim your cure." Here there was some delay and an awkward silence, but after a moment a young woman went up on stage and waved her leg brace around. She said she had had the brace for thirteen years, since getting polio at seven. The crowd applauded.

Nolen wasn't applauding, though. He had seen the girl limp as she

walked to the stage; he could see that one leg was still withered, causing her to stand with an awkward tilt. He seems to have been almost alone in making such an observation.

The psychological mechanisms by which faith healers and their patient/victims can be convinced of miracles are varied. However, the most important one may be simply failing to check whether anything has happened at all, combined with a will to believe that operates regardless of evidence. Most of the cures at Kuhlman's service could not be confirmed on the spot, though the young woman with polio was not the only clearly uncured person to claim a cure. She was also not the only such case allowed up on stage, though one man with a tumor-filled abdomen had to be kept away by assistants. In another case, the audience was treated to the spectacle of a man getting up out of his wheelchair though Nolen knew from meeting him earlier that he could walk, just with difficulty. The man was back in the wheelchair after the service.

Similar stories can be found involving other faith healers. Some cases of will to believe are quite extreme. When James Randi did his own investigation of faith healers in the 80's he found one man who claimed he had been cured of diabetes by W. V. Grant. But in fact the man was still taking insulin.⁵ One contemporary account of the 17th century faith healer Valentine Greatrakes even reported that, "So great was the confidence in him, that the blind fancied they saw the light which they could not see—the deaf imagined that they heard—the lame that they walked straight, and the paralytic that they had recovered the use of their limbs."⁶

It should be noted that these cases the problem is not simply credulity or hungering after the fantastic. It's often more a matter of hungering after the simple ability to be rid of a debilitating or potentially fatal condition. The power of this desire was well-expressed by Dr. Jim Laidler, former proponent, now opponent, of alternative medicine. When he learned his two sons had autism, he said, "If someone had e-mailed me that powdered rhino horn worked, I would have gone on a safari."⁷

Now back to the matter of sincerity. Nolen went to see Kathryn Kuhlman after the service. She was quite friendly and happily cooperated with his investigation. He left convinced of her sincerity, an impression that was confirmed when she sent him a list of supposedly cured patients to augment a list Nolen had gotten from two legal secretaries who took down names after the event. Nolen successfully followed up on more than twenty patients, but didn't find evidence that any of them had been miraculously healed. Of five malignant cases Nolen recounts, two died later, two had no improvement, and one, it turned out, had ended up at the service because he misunderstood the severity of his doctor's diagnosis.

At the end of his section on Kuhlman, Nolen offered this analysis: "[This] brings me back to Kathryn Kuhlman's lack of medical sophistication—a point that is, in her case, critical. I don't believe Miss Kuhlman is a liar; I don't believe she is a charlatan; I don't believe she is, consciously, dishonest... The problem is, and I'm sorry this has to be so blunt, one of ignorance." Kuhlman had sent Nolen a list of patients whose cures "could not possibly have been psychosomatic"—her words—Nolen found that the truth was that two-thirds were diseases in which the mind can be quite important.⁸

When I talked to Dan Barker—a former fundamentalist preacher who had worked as Kuhlman's choir librarian in his early years—to get his opinion of Kuhlman's sincerity, he told me that many of his friends dismissed her as a fraud, but he thought she was sincere. Why? "I was sincere," he told me. While never operating on such a scale as Kuhlman, as a minister he had occasionally tried quick cures by laying on of hands. One time, he had had an apparent success in restoring the voice of a sick fellow member of a barbershop quartet. Another time, though, he failed and had to tell the sick woman, "Be it unto you according to your faith," implying she would have been healed if only she had had more faith. This, of course, was just a convenient way of covering up the fact that he had no real powers—even if he sincerely believed he did.

Fallacies of Healing

Rationalizations such as the one just described are frequent in faith healing. Understanding them is an important part of understanding claims of cures that extend beyond the excitement of the faith-healing service. These do exist—just because much of faith healing is a matter of failure to follow up does not mean all of it is. Nolen, in his investigation, did find people who affirmed their cures after the service and could not be merely dismissed as clinging to a delusion. As described by a scientific observer, they don't sound like they amount to much. In the examples he gives, there were four patients with slight improvements in naturally variable conditions, one woman whose varicose veins disappeared—right when her doctor expected them to—and one man who had a cancer cure/remission but was also being given plenty of conventional treatment for his disease. Unimpressive as they may seem, a couple of well-known logical fallacies can make them seem like powerful proof of a healer's abilities.

The first of these fallacies is called *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, Latin for “after this, therefore, because of this.” It is the mistake of thinking that because one event followed another, the one caused the other. Mark Twain died before WWI broke out, but it is unlikely that his death caused the war. On the other hand, it is no surprise that people get in the habit of thinking this way, since it often does lead to correct inferences. If a person is shot and dies an hour later, it is likely that the gunshot wound caused the death.

Some excellent examples of this fallacy can be found in the world of medical quackery. On State Street in Madison, Wisconsin there's a “community pharmacy” whose storefront site boasts a wide variety of alternative cures. The employees of the pharmacy tell me that one of their most popular products is homeopathic sleeping pills. A key principle in homeopathy is that diluting a treatment makes it more powerful. In some cases, the treatments are so dilute that the average pill will not contain a single molecule of the active ingredient. Yet people take the pills and fall asleep, so the pills must be the cause of the sleep, right?

Such reasoning sounds silly when the problem is mild insomnia,

but it gains power when wrapped up in the anguish of a serious disease. In June of 2005, the *New York Times* ran a pair of articles on parents of autistic children who claim that thimerosal, a vaccine preservative containing small amounts of mercury, causes autism, and that certain alternative therapies could cure this supposed poisoning. Several angry letters were received in response:

To the Editor:

What concerns me most is not whether or not thimerosal causes autism. It is that the “experts” feel they have the authority to label parents of autistic children as lacking credibility just because there is no scientific evidence, they say, of the harmfulness of thimerosal in vaccines.

These children are the evidence, and their parents are the experts. Pretending that a problem doesn’t exist because it hasn’t reached some statistically significant number is disturbing.

How about asking the scientific community for evidence of the complete safety and efficacy of these and all drugs? Without such evidence, most parents will just have to rely on gut feelings. We can’t wait for the science to catch up.⁹

The fact is that if enough children get autism and enough are vaccinated, there’s bound to be some overlap between the two groups. Statistics, which this parent derides, are necessary to tell the difference between a real connection and the fallacious reasoning of “my son was vaccinated and then got autism, so the vaccination caused the autism.” When the Institute of Medicine examined the evidence, no connection was found.¹⁰ When it’s your son, though, the logic of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* can be quite compelling. Here’s another letter that appeared:

To the Editor:

Your dismissive tone toward parents and alternative therapies is disappointing.

Some years ago, we tried sauna and vitamin therapy for our autistic son. The improvement was dramatic, and I am grateful

to his doctors. The alternatives--special schooling, poor quality of life and Ritalin—were far more expensive.

All parents care about is that their child gets well. Our son got well.¹¹

Again, without well-controlled experiments, it is impossible to say whether the alternative therapies caused the recovery. Sometimes, children with autism improve considerably without any treatment.¹² Few attempts to test any of the treatments mentioned in the letters have been made. But what research has been done on vitamin therapy has shown no benefit.¹³

In order to fall prey to such reasoning, one does not even have to end up better. It has been noted that even ultimately fatal diseases have their ups and downs. A patient who winds up at a faith healer in a “down” period may find genuine improvement afterwards, in spite of the fact that he or she will die eventually.¹⁴

Another psychological mechanism that can support a belief in faith healing is confirmation bias: counting the hits and ignoring the misses. To get a picture of how powerfully this can work, try finishing the following story: a young man, recently converted to Christianity, wants to show one of his friends the power of God. It's raining, so he tells his friend he'll pray for the rain to stop and it will. Then...

Well, what happens? Many people, looking at this story, will think the proper end is that the rain doesn't stop and the young man learns not to pray for childish things.

It doesn't have to end that way, though. In his book *Why I Rejected Christianity*, John W. Loftus tells just such a story from his youth. He admits it may have gotten distorted in his memory with time, but the basics are probably true to life. A friend told him that he was a Satanist, and would demonstrate the power of Satan by making it rain. They pulled into a car wash, and when they came out it was drizzling, then raining full force. Loftus responded by saying “In the name of Jesus I command it to stop raining! And don't rain the rest of the night!” The command worked.¹⁵

Loftus says that looking back, he realizes that people have won

at casinos against equally long odds, so the story proves nothing. But the really interesting thing is that if it had continued raining, it would have been the story of how he got rid of some silly ideas about prayer. As it happened, though, it became a miraculous story that he told time and time again during career as a minister. Odds are that few people, hearing his story, immediately thought of all the other times when a young convert learned his lesson about prayer. Odds are they counted the hit, and didn't give a thought to countless misses.

An example of confirmation bias which ends up seeming somewhat silly when closely examined is the shrine at Lourdes. The Catholic Church claims to have confirmed 67 medically inexplicable cures resulting from visits to the shrine. Who can doubt that? A medically inexplicable cure is a medically inexplicable cure, right?

This becomes problematic, though, when one considers the huge number of people who visit the shrine each year, hoping for a cure yet getting none. Millions have visited the shrine since 1860. If there were 67 truly inexplicable cures, this would only mean that medical science is capable of understanding upwards of 99.99% of what happens there. Medical science has as good a claim to miraculous results here as anyone. It gets worse, though. The portion of visitors that are healed is so small that, according to a calculation done by Carl Sagan, visiting the Lourdes shrine actually seems to reduce the rates of cancer remission.¹⁶

It's hard to imagine a faith healer being treated as charitably as the Lourdes shrine. This, however, is why the ability to rationalize convincingly—as Dan Barker did—is so important. If someone goes to a faith healer and improves, even a little, by *post hoc ergo proptor hoc* a miracle is proclaimed. A hit is counted. If someone fails to improve, they must not have been lacking in faith, or suffering from some other spiritual malady. The miss is ignored.

So far, I have focused on the means by which faith healers can convince others (and sometimes themselves) of their powers without doing a bit of good. Of course, they may sometimes do good through non-supernatural means. One example of this is the story of how the

Roman emperor Vespasian supposedly healed two paralytics. This case is famous in part because it was employed by Enlightenment-era skeptics such as Hume and Thomas Paine as an example of a miracle which their Christian opponents would quickly reject in spite of the good evidence for it. Hume's treatment is particularly amusing; he mounts a virtual apologetic for Vespasian, but then remarks "no evidence can well be supposed stronger for so gross and palpable a falsehood." Now, however, it is generally suspected that this was a genuine psychosomatic cure. Interestingly, Hume scholar Anthony Flew has noted that when one reads Tacitus' account of the feat, one finds that Vespasian's physicians realized at the time that the patients had no organic lesions.¹⁷ A hint at what really happened was preserved by history, even if historians went centuries without noticing it.

Also, in between cases of completely bogus cures and genuine psychosomatic ones are those where a patient gets genuine pain relief but nothing more. Consider this case, reported by William Nolen: a fifty-year-old woman has stomach cancer that has metastasized to her spine, making walking painful and only possible with a back brace. She attends a faith-healing service held by Kathryn Kuhlman. Kuhlman announces that someone with cancer is being healed. At that point, the woman later reported, she "could just feel this burning sensation all over my body and I was convinced the Holy Spirit was at work." She goes up front, takes off her brace, and runs around the stage, miraculously no longer needing the thing. She "felt wonderful" and "didn't have a pain anywhere." That night, she goes to bed convinced she's cured.

Then she wakes up the next morning in terrible pain. A bone in her spinal column had collapsed because of the running around she did. The woman died two months later.¹⁸ No miraculous cure had been affected, only a temporary pain relief. Terence Hines, commenting on this case, argued that the body is known to release endorphins in time of stress or excitement, and this is likely responsible for the apparent cure.¹⁹ Because emotions often run so high at faith healing services, such excitement-induced "cures" are probably not uncommon.

The Healings of Jesus

Jesus lived in a time when faith healing was widely accepted and medical knowledge was scarce. Likely, none of Jesus' followers had the medical training of Vespasian's court physicians. They wouldn't have been examining paralytics for organic lesions. Remember, even the court physicians didn't realize they had seen psychosomatic cures, a concept that just didn't exist in those days. But Jesus would have made Kathryn Kuhlman look knowledgeable; at least she knew of hysterical disorders even if she didn't know much about them. Lack of medical knowledge means a large potential for error in reports of healing cases. Distortions would be a major problem even if the gospels were written by eyewitnesses.

Relevant to understanding the shape of Jesus' career are the passages in the Bible where huge groups of people gather around him: Matthew 15:29-31, Matthew 21:14, Mark 1:32-34, Mark 6:53-56, and Luke 6:17-19. Without any details, we have no reason to suppose these events were any more impressive than the modern faith healing services where many are pronounced cured but few cures can be confirmed on the spot. The specific, more memorable stories likely represent some of the more impressive alleged cures (and of course may go beyond anything that actually would have been claimed by eyewitnesses). The claim that a "whole city" showed up at Jesus' door may be exaggerated, but reports of huge crowds need not be taken as complete fabrications. They fit with what we know about how sick people will jump at any chance to be healed.

Indeed, the portrait one gets of the crowds is one of desperate people who badly want a cure—perhaps so badly that they would believe they'd gotten one against all evidence, as modern people have been observed to do. The story of the paralytic whose friends dug through a roof, the story of the hemorrhaging woman who would do anything just to touch Jesus' cloak, and the reports that people clamored just to touch him (Mark 3:10 and Luke 6:19) all speak to how badly the people around Jesus wanted—wanted to *believe in*—miracles.

When we turn to specific stories of people Jesus healed, we might

expect exaggerations, but many stories are unimpressive on close examination. Matthew (8:5-13) and Luke (7:1-10) tell the story of a centurion with such faith that he believes Jesus can heal his servant without even meeting the boy. We are told that the healing was successful, but how did Jesus' followers learn that if they didn't go with Jesus to see him? We aren't told. A very similar story is told of a royal official and his son in John 4:46-54. Could it be that these cases were a simple matter of failing to see if the healing happened, as often happens today?

These two distant healings are the most troublesome cases, but there are others that leave us wondering if anything really happened. Jesus had no William Nolen following him around, trying to follow up cures. Important tools used in Nolen's follow-ups, such as the U.S. Postal Service, were nonexistent at the time. We do not even have evidence that Jesus' followers examined people before hand to make sure they had the conditions people thought they had.

Take the example of the paralytic brought in through the roof (Mark 2:1-12). Did his friends explain his exact ailment, or did those present simply assume he was paralyzed? It's possible that he was like the man who Nolen saw get up out of a wheelchair at the Kuhlman service. He may have been brought in on a mat because he found walking painful or with difficulty, rather than not at all. If so, Jesus telling him his sins were forgiven may have been just what he needed to get up and walk without pain, if only for a few moments.

Or, look at the hemorrhaging woman (Mark 5:24-34). Was she bleeding so profusely that it would be immediately obvious that the bleeding had stopped? The Bible says "immediately her hemorrhage was stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease," but what if she "felt in her body" without any real improvement? In this, she would be like the woman who took off her back brace for Kathleen Kuhlman only to die later. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the hemorrhaging woman would go around denouncing Jesus if her cure turned out to be illusory. Jesus would become just another entry in the long list of things that she tried that didn't work. On the other hand, if her bleeding stopped over the course of the following week or

even lessened a little she'd be sure to tell everyone. There's confirmation bias at work.

This criticism can be applied even to one of Jesus' most impressive healings, the resurrection of Jarius' daughter (Mark 5:21-24, 35-43). She is not reported dead until Jesus is en route to heal her of her disease. In the heat of the moment, perhaps someone made a mistake. It is even possible that, with no one following up, she in truth died only after Jesus had gone to see her. It's worth noticing how Matthew 9:18 changes the story by having the girl dead from the start, perhaps trying to counter worries about heat-of-the-moment confusion.

Some of Jesus' miracles, true, cannot be explained in natural terms. Here, though, not only is there the possibility that such stories are legendary, there is evidence that miracle stories were exaggerated as they were retold. In Mark's version of the withering of the fig tree (verses 11:12-14, 20-21), Jesus curses the tree one day and the disciples are amazed to see it withered the next morning. In Matthew's version (21:19), the tree withers "at once." Such instances of embellishment help make sense of stories such as the healing of the leper in Mark 1:40-45. Mark says that the healing happened immediately. The truth may be that the man recovered several days later, and the story was changed just as the story of the fig tree was changed. His recovery might have happened without Jesus' help, or Jesus may have managed to work a psychosomatic cure (as William Nolen notes,²⁰ people with skin diseases sometimes benefit from placebos or hypnotherapy).

Given the nature of our sources, it is not at all surprising that cures would be exaggerated beyond the facts of the case, and that miracles with no basis in fact (such as the walking on water) would be added to Jesus' story. It would make no sense, however, for later Christians to make up stories of Jesus failing. Nevertheless, failing is exactly what Jesus does when he returns to Nazareth in Mark 6:1-6. In response to this failure, he rationalizes away: "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

With this statement, Jesus has clearly placed himself with Dan Barker and every other person who has falsely claimed healing pow-

ers. This is not an entirely isolated statement either. When Jesus tells the hemorrhaging woman, "Daughter, your faith has made you well," there is an implied message of "those who do not have faith will not be made well." This constitutes positive evidence that 1) Jesus had no miraculous healing powers and 2) he sincerely believed he did. Failure is hard to account for on the orthodox hypothesis: why should Omnipotence incarnate be unable to do miracles in his home town? The evidence may not be as conclusive as what we'd get if we could go back in time and examine alleged cures, but given the nature of our sources, it is striking.

Jesus the Exorcist

When we turn to Jesus' exorcisms, they can be understood in much the same way as the healings, only involving mental ailments rather than physical ones. When the Bible tells of Jesus performing many exorcisms at one time, we need not assume that all the demoniacs resembled the girl from *The Exorcist* movie or the man from the famous story with the swine. The patient in Mark 9:14-29 appears to have been epileptic:

"Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you are able!—All things can be done for one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean

spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could not we cast it out?" He said to them, "This kind can only come out through prayer."

That many "demoniacs" at that time were really epileptic is further confirmed by Lucian's description of a Syrian exorcist in *The Lover of Lies*. Belief in a demonic etiology of epilepsy can be found even today, for example, among recent Hmong immigrants (the 1998 book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* provides a tragic case study in what happens when these traditional beliefs collide with modern medicine).

There are several other things worth noting about this story. Look at how easily Jesus shrugs off the failure of his disciples to exorcise the demon. Note also how healing is tied to belief, preparing an easy cop-out for failures. Worse than these two things, though, is that the story contains no immediately visible sign that the boy was healed. Rather than end at Jesus' command, the boy's seizure continued for awhile before ending naturally. Onlookers were led to believe that this would be his last seizure, but again, there was no William Nolen following up Jesus' cures.

We should keep in mind, though, that some of Jesus' patients may have been more conventional demoniacs. Such people can be found today, though modern science gives us a perspective on such cases that wouldn't have been available to Jesus and his followers. One psychiatrist by the name of Paul Meier has reported that he has encountered hundreds of apparent possession cases but that, to his initial surprise, "all of the 'demons' I was seeing were allergic to Thorazine." Curiously, Meier is an evangelical Christian who also says, "I believe demons really do exist because the Bible says they do." He was, however, forced to admit that real demons were not involved in any of the cases he saw.²¹

Some Christians will argue that there are a few real demon possession cases out there, but the evidence is pretty thin. Take alleged instances of “supernatural strength,” for example: this could easily be an illusion created by the willingness of a psychiatric patient to do things a rational person wouldn’t, like struggle against a team of orderlies who the patient has no chance of overcoming. Cases that don’t respond to drugs need no more be supernatural than incurable bodily diseases.

Exorcism happens today too, and a study by sociologist Michael Cuneo suggests how Jesus may have been able to help traditional victims of demon possessions. Cuneo met one pair of exorcists who had introduced a practice of “binding” demons—basically, telling them not to raise such a ruckus. These were people who sincerely believed in the reality of possession, and who in part reasoned that God ought to have the power to make demons be quiet. However, it also involved a telling admission: “There’s so much autosuggestion and therapeutic pressure at play when you pray over people for deliverance. If you tell them that the demon will come out in a bucket of vomit, they’ll vomit. If you tell them it will come out in a scream, they’ll scream. If you tell them not to be surprised if they thrash on the floor, they’ll thrash on the floor.”²² One wonders if there was a certain amount of role-playing going on in Jesus’ exorcisms—not faking per se, but people acting the way they did less out of a specific psychiatric condition than a belief that they had a demon in them. In such a situation, their problems might go away if a charismatic figure could convince them he had removed their demon.

The Nature Miracles

The term “nature miracle” is a blanket term that scholars apply to all the miracles attributed to Jesus that are not healings or exorcisms: the turning of water into wine, feeding the multitude, walking on water, calming the storm, and so on. They fit no definite pattern, but are worth looking at on a case-by-case basis.

I have already noted reasons to consider the turning of water into wine and feeding of the multitude as legends. However, it should be

pointed out that non-supernatural, non-legendary explanations have been proposed for every one of these events. This state of affairs we owe largely to 19th-century biblical scholars like Heinrich Paulus who were extremely skeptical of the supernatural but accepted the historicity of the gospels. Paulus proposed, for example, that Jesus was mistaken for having walked on water when in fact he had merely been wading. This explanation is easy to laugh at now. I do not think it is quite as implausible as it seems at first, though, since true believers have been known to see miracles where neutral observers see ordinary events. Still, more likely than not the story is legendary.

On the other hand, some of the nature miracles have an excellent chance of being historical. The paradigm example is the calming of the storm. John Loftus' story, told earlier in this chapter, provides one modern parallel. Another comes from Harry Houdini. In his book debunking the spirit mediums of his day, Houdini points out that while much of what mediums do is standard performance magic, some of their feats are a matter of exploiting a lucky circumstance. To make this point, Houdini tells the story of how one fourth of July, Houdini was with a family that included some small children, waiting for fireworks. It was raining, so one of the boys asked Houdini to make the rain stop. Houdini told the rain to stop and it stopped. It then occurred to the boy that maybe it would have stopped raining anyway. So Houdini told the rain to start again, and it did. Houdini reports that his demonstration stopped there, however: "I was not taking any more chances."²³

Such stories impress in part because the average person's intuitions about probability are far from perfect. One in a million odds against an event's happening sounds miraculous, but given the great number of events in our lives, we can all expect "miracles" of that sort to happen on a regular basis (one mathematician put the rate at one miracle per month). To give a more specific example, if all of the millions of people in America know a few people who die each year, and everybody thinks about the people they know from time to time at random, it is inevitable that some of our countless instances of thinking of others will coincide with the person's death. The result: lots of anecdotes floating around

about “psychic premonitions” of others’ deaths.²⁴

So when we look at the story of Jesus calming the storm, we should realize that while it is difficult to be sure of the historicity of any single story, the storm miracle has an excellent chance of being historical. Similarly, when we see stories such as the miraculous catches of fish and the coin in the fish’s mouth, it is possible that these are based on somewhat improbable events which the disciples took to be miracles, simply because their grasp of probability was no better than that of the average person today.

The Big Picture


As I indicated in the beginning of this chapter, all of this should contribute to our picture of the disciples’ mindset after Jesus’ crucifixion. It is often said that it caused them to despair, but the truth was probably more complex. Research on apocalyptic groups shows that, surprisingly, members tend to cling tightly to their beliefs even in the face of events that seem to disprove those beliefs. The most famous example comes from the 1956 study *When Prophecy Fails*. This book centered on the followers of a suburban housewife who claimed that aliens had told her the world would end on a certain date in December. When this prediction and several lesser ones failed, the result was not disillusionment but a series of bizarre rationalizations. The group did not come apart on its own, but had to be forced apart by the threat of psychiatric commitment (though the only member actually taken to court was declared sane).²⁵

The situation with Jesus’ followers, however, likely involved a little more than just the human tendency to hold on tenaciously to religious beliefs. After all, it wasn’t merely that they believed him to be an agent of God. It wasn’t merely that they had left their families and livelihoods to follow this Jesus who they thought a prophet, and quite likely the Messiah. They had proof! Hadn’t they seen him heal the sick and cast out demons? When dealing with modern people who seek out the services of faith healers and quacks, it is easy to feel that they ought to know better. Jesus’ followers, though, lived long before

the advent of modern medicine, before there was anyone to tell them about the placebo effect and endorphins and hysterical disorders such as neurodermatitis and double-blind controlled studies and epilepsy and thorazine. From their point of view, it would have been quite understandable to remain convinced that God had worked miracles through Jesus, and to struggle to make sense of why He would let Jesus be killed after doing so. In such a state, they would have been ready to latch on to anything which would allow their world to go back to making sense again. But what was that thing?

Chapter 6

Appearances Of Jesus

he proper place to begin in understanding the resurrection is with the appearances of Jesus. They occur after the discovery of the tomb in the gospel narratives, but this event appears nowhere in Paul's letters. If the majority of scholars are right in attributing I Corinthians 15:3-9 to Paul, the appearances cannot be entirely legendary. The empty tomb, though, is on much shakier ground. So what do we make of the appearances?

The Nature of the Appearances

How does one explain Paul's report? There are basically three options: the disciples lied, Jesus survived the crucifixion ("swoon theory"), and hallucinations.

It may be true that literally nobody today thinks the resurrection was a hoax put on by the disciples. Biblical scholar Dale Allison lists Richard Carrier as the only proponent of this view,¹ but Carrier only argues that it's a possibility, not the best possibility. I concur with this judgment: while, *pace* the apologists, liars do occasionally make martyrs, honest belief fits better with what we can infer about the mental state of the disciples post-crucifixion.

Swoon theory is most famous for its use in Heinrich Paulus' drive to account for every last detail of the gospel accounts in naturalistic terms. Though Paulus' general approach is now seen as ridiculous, might he have been right on this particular miracle?

First, I honestly don't know of any analogous cases, a case where someone mistakenly thought dead for 36 hours was later proclaimed risen from the dead. Beyond that, though, it is interesting to see how Paul talks about the resurrection. He talks about his encounter with Jesus as a revelatory experience (Gal 1:13-17) that grants him special status (I Cor 9:1). After giving his list of appearances in I Cor 15, Paul talks about how the resurrected bodies of believers will be radically different than their current bodies.

Then there is the business of the list of appearances. On reflection, it does not sound like we are dealing with a normal physical body here. Set aside the issue of whether Paul would have used the word "physical" (or the Greek equivalent) if you had asked him to describe the body. What Paul describes is not, in any case, a normal body. For point of comparison: In the Gospels, when Jesus is not preaching, he does not wink out of existence. Instead, he is portrayed doing normal human things like eating and sleeping. To get from place to place he walks or rides a donkey (or a donkey and a colt simultaneously, according to the Matthew). Yes, he at one point walks on water, but he does not walk through walls or teleport.

Now look at Paul's account of the resurrection appearances—and it is the word "appearances" that gives it all away. Paul does not say that one night Peter awoke to see Jesus standing outside his window, and then Peter brought Jesus to the rest of the disciples, and then Jesus walked to his hometown to visit James, and so on. Rather, Paul tells the Corinthians that, "He appeared..." "he appeared..." "he appeared..." "he appeared..." he appeared."

Let us try to account for this language on the hypothesis that Jesus existed as he did before the crucifixion. Perhaps after awaking Peter, Peter hid him in a cave or building somewhere, and then Peter gathered the disciples so Jesus could briefly pop out of the cave for them to see, and then the same was done with James and the 500. Doesn't work so well, does it?

Though I admit Paul does not make this entirely clear, it seems he means Jesus was appearing out of thin air and then disappearing. In

spite of our reasons for doubting the accuracy of the gospels reports (again, more on that later), they do back up the idea of an appearing and disappearing Jesus: In Matthew, the women “suddenly” see Jesus. He says the disciples will see him in Galilee, and it does not sound as if he will be walking. In Luke, he disappears before the eyes of the disciples he met on the road to Emmaus. In John, he appears out of nowhere in a house whose doors have been shut against the Jews.

All of this is suggestive of hallucinations. There is one other point that should be made, which comes from Robert Sheaffer, who has written many magazine articles and one book on UFO reports. He has also written a book on the origins of Christianity called *The Making of the Messiah*. It gets off track in relying heavily on anti-Christian polemic from the second century and later (does Sheaffer imagine such works can be treated as contemporary debunkings?), but his comments on the similarity between UFO reports and the resurrection appearances are worth listening to.

Sheaffer notes that Jesus did not appear widely after his resurrection, but only to a limited number of followers. He cites Celsus and Origen in support of this point, but it can be shown just by looking at the New Testament reports. Take away one line from Paul’s report (the one about the appearance to 500 brethren), and we have a list of witnesses that barely extends beyond Jesus’ core of disciples. Even the appearance to the 500, though, is a far cry from his very public pre-mortem appearances—riding into Jerusalem for a great crowd and stirring up trouble in the temple. In failing to appear in public, Sheaffer argues that the risen Jesus was very much like UFOs, “a *jealous phenomenon*, one that is suspiciously careful or watchful in allowing itself to be observed. It will either reveal itself or hide, depending on who is watching.”²

To grasp the force of this last point, put yourself in the position of the Jewish leaders: There’s a new cult in town. The leader is killed. Several weeks later, a number of members of the cult announce that their leader has risen from the dead; they’ve seen him alive. You talk to a number of people who have seen the leader. You find their sincerity

compelling, so you ask to meet him. Then you hear the response: they tell you you can't because he's ascended to heaven already, or because he only appears to those who are worthy.

Wouldn't that make you suspicious? Wouldn't that be reason to think that maybe, just maybe, the guy wasn't risen after all, and something funny was going on inside the heads of his followers?

The idea that Christianity may have begun as a sort of shared delusion is surprising, at first. However, this would not make Christianity entirely unique.

Abducted

UFO sightings go back to the 1940's, but in the early years, sightings (plus one alleged crash at Roswell) were about all that got taken seriously by the mainstream press. Sure there were isolated groups of "contactees" (who I mentioned in chapter 4) claiming to be in touch with benevolent beings from other planets, but they were written off as nutty, even by most UFOlogists.

All that began to change in 1961. Here's what happened, as described in an ad that appeared five years later in the *New York Times* to tell the world about the event:

On September 19, 1961, Betty and Barney Hill of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 'sighted' a flying saucer. The experience shook them; worse, it left them with two 'lost' hours. Ultimately, they sought help from a distinguished Boston psychiatrist and neurologist. Under psychotherapy, including time-regression hypnosis, they both told extraordinary stories of being 'kidnapped' aboard an alien space vessel, and of interrogation and examination by 'humanoid' creatures. After seven months of treatment, the doctor decided that neither patient was psychotic, and both consciously and under hypnosis told what they believe to be absolute truth.³

This ad was taken out by *Look* magazine, which ran two articles on the event by John G. Fuller, whose book on the Hill case was published that same year. A few years later, in 1973, two men in Pascagoula, Mississippi reported an abduction experience of their own. Then in 1975,

following the airing of a movie version of the Hill story, six woodcutters reported that they had seen their friend, Travis Walton, zapped by a UFO. Walton returned five days later to tell his story.

A fourth case caught public attention in 1987, when novelist Whitley Strieber published his book *Communion*. Unlike his previous horror stories, Strieber claimed that the story told in *Communion* had really happened to him. Strieber tells of how one night in December, he was awakened by a strange whooshing noise coming from downstairs. Then he saw a child-sized figure with a round hat, two black holes for eyes, and a square breastplate. Strieber blacked out, and then found himself naked, numb, and being taken out of the room. Strieber found himself in the woods, then a small circular chamber, then an operating chamber where he was examined with a strange pyramid-shaped device. This event prompted Strieber to seek out hypnosis, which brought out further memories of alien abduction experiences that had happened throughout Strieber's life.

These famous cases aren't all there is to the story, however. There have been literally hundreds of less famous reports of alien abductions. In some cases, people have woken up to find themselves paralyzed, sometimes seeing otherworldly figures by their beds. Other times, they begin to suspect they have been abducted for subtler reasons, such as mysterious bruises or suddenly discovering the time is several hours later than was thought. People in both groups will then seek out hypnotism or other memory recovery techniques, as the Hills and Strieber did. When they do, they inevitably discover detailed memories of being taken onboard extraterrestrial craft.⁴ Certainly, some abduction reports are hoaxes—before his “abduction,” Travis Walton had told his mother not to worry about him if he was ever abducted by a UFO.⁵ But what motive could the hundreds of less famous abductees have for hoaxing?

Arguably, such reports are not entirely new. Carl Sagan cites the case of a 17th century girl who reported, “being attacked by half-a-dozen little men, carried paralyzed to a castle in the air, seduced, and returned home. She called the little men fairies.”⁶ The authorities of

the day responded with an accusation of witchcraft.

Today, a more scientific response is possible. First, let's look at the issue of so-called recovered memories. As noted in chapter Three, human memory is not only susceptible to forgetting, it is also susceptible to implantation of false information. A number of experiments have demonstrated that this can extend to the fabrication of events that never happened. In 1977, a couple of UFOlogists hypnotized a group of test subjects who nobody suspected of being abductees, and found that with minimal prompting they could generate elaborate abduction narratives. Though it was reported that these narratives were virtually identical to those of "real" abductees, and nobody claimed that the test subjects must have been abductees after all, the UFO community continued insisting that everyone else who generated such tales under hypnosis was telling the truth.⁷ Mainstream researchers got a similar result in an experiment conducted a few years later, though the memory they tried to fabricate was less exotic: being awakened by a loud noise.⁸ Another experiment, conducted by leading memory expert Elizabeth Loftus, succeeded in implanting a false memory of being lost in a mall as a child, and this experiment *did not* employ hypnosis.⁹ This latter experiment is consistent with other psychological evidence that the so-called "hypnotic state" is not so special as is popularly supposed.¹⁰

What about people who have strange experiences at night and remember them without hypnosis? Actually, these reports fit the pattern of a well-understood psychological phenomenon.¹¹ One of these is sleep paralysis. When we dream, our brains lose control over our bodies to keep us from acting out our dreams. This mechanism can fall out of sync, causing people to wake up paralyzed. For similar reasons, people sometimes hallucinate when falling asleep or waking up. Such hallucinations are known as "hypnagogic" or "hypnopompic" hallucinations, and are one of the most common types of hallucinations that occur, though their existence is not common knowledge.

Furthermore, psychological evaluations of abductees themselves cast doubt on their claims. In 1981, a pro-UFO group arranged for nine abductees to be evaluated by a psychologist who was unaware of

their status as abductees. The results were not quite as hoped for. The abductees were found not to have any full-blown mental illnesses, but were found to have “considerable sensitivity... to fantasy.”¹²

After his own experience, *Communion* author Whitley Strieber sought out assurances of his sanity from psychiatrist Donald Klein. Dr. Klein informed him that his symptoms “were consistent with an abnormality in the temporal lobe,” temporal-lobe epilepsy to be specific, a condition known to be responsible for a range of strange experiences. In *Communion*, Strieber reports that two separate EEG tests showed no evidence of this condition.¹³ However, a later MRI showed scarring indicative of the condition. Strieber decided not to go along with further testing, which would have involved several weeks in the hospital.¹⁴

While not paralleling the reports of Jesus’ appearances in every respect, a key point emerges from studying UFO and alien abduction claims: collective delusions can be taken to an extravagant extent. What’s more, they can be pitched to and believed by a wider audience than the immediate subject of the delusions.

20 Mature, Rational Adults

Another helpful case comes from my home town. There’s an old theater there called the Grand Opera House. It was built way back in the 19th century, and can boast of having had such performers as Harry Houdini and Mark Twain perform in it. Today, local schools use it for musicals, orchestra concerts, and the like. That fact alone put me inside the building a fair number of times from grade school to high school. Going to the Grand sparked the telling of rumors of ghosts that were haunting the place.

In the summer of 2005, I decided to find out what was the basis for these local legends. I went to the public library, and in the local archives found an article from *Fate* magazine about the shooting of a made-for-TV movie that had occurred at the theater.¹⁵ During the shooting, there were numerous ghost sightings. Some involved pairs of witnesses, such as the two college students who decided to go ghost hunting in the tunnels connected to the Grand:

"We were standing there for about five minutes," Jan said. "Then suddenly it got awfully cold. Peggy and I held hands—which sounds silly but it helps. Then we both saw something on the dirt floor about five feet away. It looked like an oil slick on water but it was, like, shining with its own light. Then it began to rise up and it took something like a human shape only without any legs. It had a head but it all kept looking like an oil slick. Then it stuck an arm out toward us like it was going to touch us. We both screamed and it just melted back down into the dirt. We got out of there fast!"

Not only did pairs of witnesses see some events, the article describes one scene as: "While 20 mature, rational adults sit spellbound in the balcony, a ghostly figure crosses an empty stage, then slams into an emergency exit door."

I bring this story up most importantly because apologists frequently insist that hallucinations cannot be group events. The local tale I cite is not unique; there are many other reports of group sightings of ghosts.¹⁶ Do ghosts, then, exist? If so, we must seriously consider the possibility that Jesus came back as a ghost.

Such a conclusion would be hasty, however. I find it useful to compare apologetic insinuations that the appearances couldn't have been hallucinations with the discussion in *Phantasms of the Living*, a book put out in 1886 by the Society for Psychical Research.¹⁷ It was written by men who believed that hallucinations could not explain the stories they documented. They had naïve assumptions of their own, such as their apparent belief that being well-educated should make you immune to hallucination. However, they express infinitely more caution in ruling out hallucination than apologists, freely admitting that many reports could be explained as such.

The authors realized that, "All manner of false beliefs have in their day been able to muster a considerable amount of evidence in their support, much of which is not consciously fraudulent." This is a point not merely conceded but argued, citing especially reports of supernatural phenomena during the witch-hunts. It seemed that not

all of these could be attributed to mere chance or forced confessions. That so many people should lie seemed so improbable to the people of the time that they accepted the reality of the reports. The authors of *Phantasms* argue that their problem was lack of awareness of hallucinations, both due to psychiatric conditions and suggestion, as well as the problem of false memories. In discussing suggestion, they cite a case from the witch-hunting manual the *Malleus Maleficarum*, in which a girl and her friends saw the girl as a horse, but a priest saw her as a girl (the *Malleus* explains this with reference to the priest's immunity from evil powers).¹⁸

A similar impression of the SPR's caution can be gotten from a book on hallucinations published a decade after *Phantasms* by Edmund Parish. Parish felt claims of telepathy were prominent enough to deserve a one-chapter critique near the end of his book. One of the types of cases presented in *favor* of telepathy was "collective hallucinations," though Parish says that the term, "must not be understood to include hallucinatory phenomenon affecting great crowds of people, since it is admitted that 'popular' or 'epidemic' hallucinations are not telepathically caused."¹⁹ In other words, scientific proponents of telepathy did *not* claim non-telepathic causes could not explain any case. It was only *some* cases of which they made this claim.

The best evidence for group hallucinations involves cases where many persons reported seeing something fantastic, but an independent check showed it was all in their minds. One example comes from a wave of Marian apparitions that spread to the U.S. from Medjugorje, Yugoslavia. In one city where a woman was claiming to receive revelations from the Virgin, many of those who gathered also reported seeing the sun dance and spin in the sky. However, when a local skeptic's organization set up a filtered telescope, every one of the roughly two hundred people who looked at the sun through it agreed that the sun was not doing acrobatics after all.²⁰

Others resemble the case reported in the *Malleus*. For example, SPR member E. J. Dingwall reported that he had once been to a séance where most attendees reported a great variety of manifestations: music com-

ing out of nowhere, phantom animals, spirit hands. Dingwall, however, neither saw nor heard nor felt anything.²¹ A more recent report comes from Michael Cuneo's study of modern exorcism. In the course of his research, he sat in on fifty exorcisms. On some occasions, he reports just about everyone else would claim to see something extraordinary—a levitation, for example—but he would be forced to tell them he hadn't seen the event. In his opinion, "People tend to be so keyed up during an exorcism, so eager to sink their fingers into something preternatural, that they easily convince themselves that they're seeing, hearing, or feeling things that simply aren't there—not *really* there—to be seen, heard, or felt."²²

The point about being keyed up is central. A look at the story of the ghosts of the Grand shows this is often what happened. The author, Bob Jacobs, notes that the two college girls who saw a ghost were specifically going ghost-hunting. Jacobs claims that the reason he and 19 others decided to stake out the building after hearing the report is that they were "skeptical," but the narrated actions—locking the doors, shutting off the lights, and so forth—suggest otherwise.

All of this fits with the results of a number of laboratory psychology experiments, which Terence Hines discusses in connection with UFO sightings. Hines argues that UFO reports will often differ somewhat from what was actually there to see. The experiments he cites involve things such as optical illusions, the ability to tell the color of apples under various circumstances, and the ability to tell whether a light in the dark was moving. Their general result is that "human perception and memory are not only unreliable under a variety of conditions... but that perception and memory are also *constructive*. That is, perception is a function not only of the actual sensory stimulus that is picked up by the eye or ear but also a function of what we know and believe about the world, even if that knowledge and belief are wrong."

Among the real world (or, well, outside the laboratory) cases that Hines cites along these lines is one where a UFO was sighted and described in some detail as being "a huge saucer with square windows" (by one set of witnesses) and "a cigar-shaped UFO... that had rocket-type

exhaust and windows” (by a different set). What the witnesses didn’t report, but should have been able to see at the time, was the reentry of a Russian rocket, which would not have had a huge saucer, windows, or exhaust. This implies that the witnesses had seen the reentry and mentally added several details.²³

Though the reports of Cuneo and Dingwall go beyond Hines’ data, Hines only described what can happen in a laboratory or when a person has been surprised by a strange light. After all, neither of those situations involve fervent belief. Once it is realized that small amounts of expectation can produce small distortions of perception, it becomes unsurprising to find that a great amount of “keying up” can produce such hallucinations as an apparent levitation.

A final point: group hallucination does not mean exactly identical hallucinations for everyone in the group. Dale Allison, in a discussion similar to the present one, notes that, “There are examples of collective hallucinations in which people claimed to see the same thing but, when closely interviewed, disagreed on the details, proving that they were after all not seeing exactly the same thing.”²⁴ This, though, is not much of a barrier to hallucinations being accepted as veridical, as close interviewing cannot be assumed in every or even most cases, and true believers can always simply ignore whatever contrary evidence turns up.

Considering Objections

I think the apologist objection that hallucinations occur only to individuals is the one that seems most serious at first glance, even if it is fairly well exploded by a local ghost story. However, apologists have made numerous other “refutations,” indeed, Gary Habermas (along with his protégé Michael Licona) claim that “there are probably more refutations of this theory than any other.”²⁵ However, having many arguments is not the same as having good arguments. Indeed, part of the reason I find it worthwhile to look at these arguments at length is the level of ignorance and naïveté they display. I will be focusing on the arguments of Habermas, because he claims to be able to refute all skeptical theories using only the barest facts agreed upon by all scholars.

I should start out by noting that Habermas has made one argument that does not fit this standard. He claims that hallucinations have trouble explaining the fact that “individuals and groups, friends as well as foes saw Jesus not once but many times over a period of forty days. We are told that these numbers included both men and women, hardheaded Peter and softheaded Mary Magdalene, indoors and outdoors, and so on.”²⁶ This is a claim that certainly would not get universal agreement from scholars. A significant example comes from Wolfhart Pannenberg’s response to Habermas’ debate with Anthony Flew. Pannenberg indicates his general agreement that there is good evidence for the resurrection, but makes clear that he does not think the appearances happened exactly as described in the gospels.²⁷ Is Habermas counting on his readers not understanding the difference between appearances and appearances as exactly as described? Or does he have trouble keeping the difference straight himself?

Beyond the fact that the gospel reports of the appearances are non-eyewitness, we do not even have an appearance account from our earliest source, Mark. This will get lay readers thinking of Mark 16:9-20, but scholars are in near universal agreement that these verses were a later addition to the text. Why? A refreshingly blunt explanation comes from the New International Version, a translation not usually known for its liberal tendencies: “The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20.”²⁸ When Matthew and Luke added appearance stories, the stories diverged, much as the birth narratives did. Matthew is considerably shorter, containing only two appearances. In the first, he tells the women at the tomb that he will be appearing in Galilee. The second is the foretold appearance, granted to the eleven on a mountaintop. Matthew says nothing of Jesus appearing to the disciples in Jerusalem. Luke, on the other hand, has his appearances in and around Jerusalem. Moreover, he deletes predictions of a Galilee appearance found in Mark (Mark 14:28 = Matthew 26:32, Mark 16:7 = Matthew 28:7). It is only Luke and John that give us such details as Jesus eating and being touched, and the bit about forty days comes only in Acts.

Furthermore, there is good reason to think that Matthew's story about Jesus' tomb being guarded was a later legend designed to answer critics (see the following chapter for details). Some of the material in the appearance stories may be similar. For example, Luke 24:36-42 says that Jesus appeared out of nowhere; the disciples thought they were seeing a ghost; and in response Jesus shows them his hands and feet and eats a fish. The truth may be that people heard about Jesus appearing out of nowhere, thought they were hearing about a ghost, and in response early Christians began saying that he showed the disciples his hands and feet and ate a fish.

This should make it clear that there is no ground whatever for thinking that the gospels are absolutely accurate records of the appearances (if the general problems with their reliability were not enough). I should note, though, that there is another argument that could be isolated from the above quote: the claim that having a variety of personality types, or the right kind of personality types, can be proof against delusion. This is the first of many objections that is shown to be naïve by looking at the alien abduction literature. Consider this quote from Whitley Strieber's *Communion*, where Strieber is talking about meeting other "abductees":

They wanted nothing to do with publicity. They demanded anonymity. They were a group of average people. I cannot seriously maintain arguments that they are insane, or even particularly unbalanced. They were all anxious, that was obvious. Under the circumstances any other reaction would have been abnormal. The group was for the most part rather hard-headed and not unusually imaginative. Among them were a business executive, a cosmetologist, a scientist, a hairdresser, a former museum curator, a musician, a dancer—in short, a cross-section of any big city.²⁹

This is not merely the defense of a believer. Everything I've read on alien abductees agrees that they come off as average people. Susan Clancy's recent book, *Abducted: How People Come to Believe They Were Kidnapped by Aliens*, is particularly forceful on this point, but it can be found in the books of Michael Shermer and Terence Hines

as well.³⁰ The fact that those claiming abduction seem sane and seem to cover a normal range of personalities does not change the fact that closer examination indicates they are not perfectly normal—though even then, they are not totally crazy. In the case of Jesus, it would be no surprise if a number of not-quite-normal personalities had been attracted to his faith healing and apocalyptic preaching.

Now I will go through the rest of Habermas' objections, made in various publications over the years:

"The psychological condition that typically produces hallucinations, characterized by belief, expectation, and even excitement, was surely lacking."³¹

This may be true for the group events described above, but it is certainly not true for individuals, as Habermas seems to think. Paul's phrase "Cephas, *then* to the twelve" makes clear that Peter's individual experience preceded that. It would be no surprise if after this first incident the disciples did have "belief, expectation, and even excitement."

Habermas is not the only apologist who seems oblivious to hallucinations not caused by expectation.³² Therefore, I should say a few words about why they are wrong. Above all else, I should emphasize that the sorts of hallucinations I will be discussing are fairly common. One authoritative work on hallucinations, by Peter Slade and Richard Bentall, estimates that 7 to 14 percent of us have experienced one.³³ Another study puts the figure for auditory hallucinations higher, at 70 percent.³⁴ These figures may do much to explain both modern and ancient reports of extraordinary happenings.

Understanding reporting bias is key to understanding the role of common types of hallucinations in supernatural reports. Many people only report such incidents after volunteering to take part in a psychological survey. Here is an example of an experience not likely to be taken seriously (it comes from *Phantasms of the Living*, but is not treated as in any way veridical):

The pictures I see generally appear at night before going to sleep, always in complete darkness, and I believe usually when I am

*rather tired. I can see them with my eyes open, but the colours are much less brilliant than when my eyes are shut. I am quite conscious of the unreality of the scenes... I see landscapes, interiors and exteriors of houses, &c., and single objects, such as flowers, books, boots, feathers, pots, &c., &c., and sometimes figures—of which, however, I can never distinguish the faces.*³⁵

Some experiences will be more readily reported, such as this example from a book of firsthand reports of ghosts:

*One night I woke up at midnight to see a lady standing over my bed. She wasn't at the side, but at the head of the bed, leaning over me. There is no room for anyone to stand where she was. The bed is pushed against the wall. She was hanging down like a shadow but I could see her clearly. Something seemed to touch me on the shoulder to wake me up. She had long hair hanging down in front of her shoulder... She had a long narrow face. Then she was gone.*³⁶

Both of these cases fit the pattern of hypnagogic hallucinations, already mentioned in connection with alien abduction claims. These are related to dreams, but occur in an in-between state between sleeping and waking. As such, they feel far more real than dreams. They are nonetheless often dismissed, but they are also often the basis for first-hand claims of supernatural experiences.

On top of this, a number of studies have shown that a major contributing factor in hallucinations is stress, and in particular the loss of a loved one.³⁷ For example, one oft-cited study published in the *British Medical Journal* in 1971 found that of a group of men and women who had lost a spouse, 47% had some kind of experience of the deceased (from feeling a presence to having a conversation), including 14% who had a visual hallucination.³⁸ The application is clear: to say that the disciples would have been feeling stress after the crucifixion would be a gross understatement. They would not only have been grieving over their master; they would have lost a way of life and been at risk of being executed just as Jesus had been.

Responding to the idea that there was groupthink involved, Habermas continues:

*"As the center of their faith, there was too much at stake; they went to their deaths defending it. Wouldn't some of them rethink the groupthink at a later date and recant or just quietly fall away?"*³⁹

Unfortunately, once someone has had an apparently real experience and given it an important place in their life, they're unlikely to be persuaded that it wasn't real. Psychologist Susan Clancy observed this in her book on alien abductees, where belief is largely a matter of groupthink:

*"once you believe, your belief becomes unfalsifiable... if you had vivid memories of being sucked up into a tube of light, you'd be sure too."*⁴⁰

Similarly, Habermas states:

*"Generally, hallucinations do not transform lives. When confronted by contrary data, such as others present not 'seeing' the same thing, those who experience hallucinations usually abandon their thesis."*⁴¹

Certainly, people who hallucinate often conclude that nothing has really happened. Sometimes they don't, however. Sometimes they write an article for *Fate* magazine or a best-selling book like *Communion*, telling the world about their paranormal experience. It is no surprise that the disciples wouldn't be talked out of their beliefs. Given what I sketched out in the previous chapter, including the human ability to resist disconfirming evidence (such as the execution of your leader), it is no surprise that the disciples would use hallucinations as the basis for a rebound.

Habermas continues:

*"Hallucinations usually result from mental illness or from physiological causes like bodily deprivation."*⁴²

I think this is adequately dealt with by the material responding to his claim about expectation. However, it is an interesting objection because it suggests Habermas is willing to throw out any objection

that sounds good without thinking about whether it makes any sense. Consider what happens when this claim is juxtaposed with the claim that hallucinations require “expectation, even excitement.” The resulting implication would be that there are hallucinogenic drugs, but they have no effect unless one expects them to. The truth is, though, that it is quite possible to hallucinate after having a tab of LSD dropped into your drink without your knowledge.

It also seems that Habermas is confusing the ways in which hallucinations *sometimes* happen with how they *always* happen. Sometimes hallucinations are caused by drugs; sometimes they are caused by sleep deprivation; sometimes they are caused by hypnagogia; sometimes they are caused by a strong expectation to see something extraordinary. But a person does not need to be in all of these states at once in order to hallucinate.

Habermas goes on:

*“The resurrection was the disciples’ central teaching, and we usually take extra care with what is closest to our hearts.”*²³

The experiences of alien abductees can take on an important role in their life. If abductees are careful at all about their beliefs, they aren’t careful enough.

Habermas then says:

“...hallucinations do not account for the conversion of the church persecutor Paul”

and his protégé Licona similarly states:

*“hallucinations do not account for the conversion of the skeptic James.”*²⁴

I’ll deal with Licona’s claim about James first. In I Corinthians, Paul mentions his experience and persecution of the church in the same breath. We have no such statement for James. Rather, we have disconnected statements that he saw Jesus post mortem (I Cor. 15:7), a statement that he was a member of the Jerusalem church (Gal 1:19), and statements that Jesus’ family in general rejected Jesus during his ministry (i.e. Mark 3:21). Even if it’s more likely than not that James only became a follower after Jesus’ death, we’re kidding ourselves if

we think we can know much about his psychological state at the time of his experience.

The “skeptic” argument is also dubious, given the somewhat skeptical or allegedly skeptical people who have seen things that aren’t there. I’ve already mentioned Bob Jacob’s difficult-to-believe claim of skepticism about ghosts in the theater. A more convincing skepticism comes from Whitley Strieber. Describing his experience in the opening pages of *Communion*, he entertains the possibility of hypnopompic hallucination, but then says:

My next conscious recollection is of being in motion. I was naked, with my arms and legs extended, as if I had been frozen in mid-leap. I was moving out of the room. There was no physical sensation at all, not of being touched, not of being warm or cold. I could feel myself as a shape and a mass, but not in terms of sensation. It was as if I had become profoundly paralyzed. Although I desperately wanted to move, I could not.

Because of my state of apparent paralysis, I am afraid that I cannot report that I was floating along on some magical pallet or a flying carpet. It could easily be that I was being carried. In any case, I was at this point in a state of panic. Gone was any fleeting thought of dream or hallucination.⁴⁵

Here and elsewhere in his book, Strieber shows an admirable skepticism. But it seems that this skepticism was simply overpowered by the apparent reality of his experience. Note that it’s unlikely that a first century Jewish peasant would have even considered the possibility of hallucination.

Though the data is more concrete, the point about Paul is way less impressive. Jesus had a finite number of brothers (Mark 6:3 lists four). He had only eleven disciples (after Judas’ betrayal). He had perhaps one hundred and twenty other followers at the time of the crucifixion (it would be odd if Acts 1:15 gave too low a figure). However, there were many, many people who refused to follow him. While the occurrence of a vision to any particular outsider may be surprising, a vision to

some outsider, somewhere, is unremarkable.

As with James, the case of Strieber may be useful here. As mentioned earlier, there is evidence that Strieber was suffering from temporal-lobe epilepsy. The following is a description of such patients taken from Philip Klass' book on alien abductions:

According to Dr. Barry L. Beyerstein, a psychologist in the Brain Behavior Laboratory of Canada's Simon Fraser University, persons with temporal lobe epilepsy—referred to as TLEs—are characterized by “their humorlessness, excessive moral zeal, and tendency to find profound meaning in mundane events.” Based on a controlled study of behavioral traits of TLEs conducted by Dr. David Bear, cited by Beyerstein, I learned that TLEs have a “penchant for somber moralization, idiosyncratic cosmological speculation and suspiciousness toward those who question their ideas.”

Further, TLEs have a “preoccupation with religious and mystical matters” and have a history of multiple conversions from one religion to another, according to Beyerstein. He cited other studies that show that TLEs are “particularly likely to have experienced a variety of spontaneous events widely regarded as paranormal. . . . Reports of ‘mystical-religious presence’ were especially prevalent,” he said.⁴⁶

When I happened across this passage, I wasn't reading for anything other than general information on UFO abduction. I was immediately struck, however, by how many items on this list match Paul: moral zeal, preoccupation with religion, religious conversion, paranormal experience, all possessed by Paul. Suspiciousness toward others is also present; in Paul's letter to the Galatians he talks about “false believers, secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us” (verses 2:4). Though we cannot subject Paul to the sort of medical tests that can be performed on a modern person like Strieber, temporal lobe epilepsy would seem to be a very strong candidate for explaining the case of Paul, even if other specific explanations for his experience are possible.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the crucifixion, a delusion that they had seen Jesus alive would have been exactly what the disciples would have needed to avoid having to admit that they had dedicated their lives to a delusion. Modern people who have had little experience with fringe groups may have a hard time believing anyone could be that irrational. However, it fits with what we know about apocalyptic groups, as well as what we know about beliefs such as alien abduction. This also would explain why the appearances of Jesus were apparently fleeting, private experiences. As sketchy as our information is, it all fits neatly enough that we can say this is what—in all probability—happened.

Chapter 7

The Empty Tomb



If all the attempts to prove that the disciples were not hallucinating, there is one major case I have not yet dealt with: the claim that hallucinations cannot explain why Jesus' tomb was empty. This objection is raised by apologists of every stripe, but most interesting is when it is raised by apologists who don't defend the gospels as first-hand accounts. Now, as I will explain below, I do not think the empty tomb would be at all inexplicable if it in fact had happened. However, suppose for the moment that it is as inexplicable as Josephus' story of the enormous gate that opened all by itself. In such a situation, it would be impossible to defend the historicity of the story without having any first-hand sources for it. Paul's silence on the story may be explained by the bare-bones nature of his report in I Corinthians, but his silence still leaves us without a good source. How then do apologists like William Lane Craig and Michael Licona defend the story?

Arguments from Authority

Much of their defense rests on an appeal to authority, specifically by claiming that a majority of Biblical scholars believe the tomb was empty. It has furthermore been suggested that they are going against their predispositions in admitting this—Craig once claimed that “Most scholars shrink back from drawing the inference that God raised Jesus from the dead, but most would not dispute the database [i.e. the things

Craig claims as facts].”²¹ Curiously, this statement comes from a follow up essay to Craig’s debate with Anthony Flew, in which he claimed that alternative explanations for the evidence “have been universally rejected by contemporary scholarship.” One wonders whether scholars could really be so inconsistent. What are the facts?

Craig has been claiming to hold the majority position since the publication of his first full book on the resurrection in 1981. In support of this point, he cites “a German scholar who has specialized in the study of the resurrection.”²² However, as a somewhat keener observer has noted, scholars on both sides of the issue have claimed to be in the majority.³

Craig also produces a list of forty-four scholars who support him, but such lists mean nothing. Consider the case of the Discovery Institute, a creationist group perhaps best known for claiming not to be creationist⁴ and of which Craig is a member. The Discovery Institute has an ongoing effort to get signatures from scientists on a statement expressing doubts about the theory of evolution in an attempt to challenge the notion that “virtually every scientist in the world believes the theory to be true.” The list currently stands at 761 signatures. This sounds impressive, but the National Center for Science Education has compiled a list of signatures from scientists supporting evolution. This list currently stands at 1046 signatures.⁴ At first this may sound like

* The Discovery Institute insists on calling its position “Intelligent Design.” Intelligent Design (ID) proponents frequently refuse to take a stance on the age of the earth, which makes them less accepting of the current scientific consensus than self-described Old Earth Creationists. The most damning evidence linking ID to creationism, though, came out during the 2004 Kitzmiller vs. Dover trial in which the teaching of ID was ruled unconstitutional. Key testimony came from Barbara Forest, author of *Creationism’s Trojan Horse*, who revealed that the ID textbook *Of Pandas and People* had originally been written as a creationist textbook, but after teaching creationism was ruled unconstitutional in 1987 all references to “creationism” were replaced with references to “Intelligent Design.” The transcript of the relevant part of the trial is available online at <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/dover/day6am2.html>. Also notable is that the arguments employed by ID proponents are often the same or similar to old creationist arguments.

only a slight majority, but the NCSE has played with the handicap of only using scientists named “Steve.” The NCSE estimates that Steves make up 1% of the U.S. population, which would imply that some 104,600 scientists could be gotten to sign a petition open to persons of all names. This would further imply that upwards of 99% of scientists support evolution. Thus, the Discovery Institute’s list provides a beautiful demonstration that “virtually every scientist in the world believes the theory to be true”—the very claim that they were trying to disprove.

The moral of the story: having a list of names is not the same as having a majority. What is needed is an attempt at systematically surveying the opinions of the group in question, whether they are voters, consumers, scientists, or scholars.

I know of only one such survey for scholarly opinions on the empty tomb. It came in 2005 from Gary Habermas, quite a few years after Craig first began making his claims.⁵ Habermas reported having surveyed the literature and finding a 75% majority accepting that the tomb was empty. Contrary to what some have wanted to believe, though, this majority does not seem to have been made up of baffled skeptics. Habermas also reported that 75% of scholars believe that Jesus was “actually raised from the dead in some manner, either bodily (and thus extended in space and time), or as some sort of spiritual body (though often undefined);” in other words, they believe “what occurred can be described as having happened to Jesus rather than only to his followers.” This is a little bit like finding out that 75% of Qur’an scholars believe that Muhammad could not have written the Qur’an without divine assistance. It reveals much about the predispositions of the scholars who study the given holy book but little about the truth of the books.

Of course, Habermas’ 75% figure can be questioned. And I know firsthand that it has been on at least one occasion—by an evangelical Christian. Here’s what happened: conservative scholar Ben Witherington III wrote an entry on his personal blog complaining about how skeptical the scholarly establishment is. I saw it linked on a Christian apologetics site called Christian CADRE, and I responded by citing Habermas’ study. The apologist who had linked to Witherington objected,

questioning Habermas' criterion for who counts as a biblical scholar. On reflection, I admit I have doubts in this area as well: included in his sample was, among other people, Richard Swinburne, a philosopher of religion without any expertise in biblical scholarship.

Anyway, whatever the proper verdict on Habermas' 75% figure, it does not provide anything like a good reason to think the tomb story is historical.

The apologists are not entirely dependent on an appeal to authority, however. They have produced a number of arguments which are supposed to prove that the tomb was in fact found empty, regardless of the quality of the sources. William Lane Craig's works regularly use 6-10 arguments. I will not spend time on every one of these, but I will look at some of the more common ones.

Argument from Paul

Implicitly recognizing the importance of Paul, William Lane Craig has tried to use Paul as a source for the empty tomb. In his 1981 book, he claimed that "Paul's testimony guarantees the fact of the empty tomb."⁶ Perhaps realizing "guarantees" goes too far without a direct statement, most of Craig's later work instead uses the word "implies," but the claim is never dropped entirely. What is the basis for it?

One part of his argument is that one can line up parts of Paul's account with Mark's story, so Paul clearly knew Mark's story. This argument is so bizarre that I am not sure how to answer it, except by *reductio ad absurdum*. Craig would line up the statement of the resurrection with the discovery of the tomb, but why not line it up with the story of Jesus leaving the tomb, before the Jewish elders and guards, in the Gospel of Peter? By Craig's reasoning, one could conclude that Paul knew not only of the empty tomb but the talking cross as well!

I Cor 15:3-5 (Craig's list) ⁷	Mk 15: 37-16:7 (Craig's list)	G. Peter 19-40 (My list) ⁸
Christ died...	And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last	And the Lord cried out, "My power, O power, you have left me behind!" When he said this, he was taken up."
he was buried...	And he [Joseph] brought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb.	He [Joseph] took the Lord, washed him, wrapped him in a linen cloth, and brought him into his own tomb, called the Garden of Joseph.
he was raised...	"He has risen, he is not here, see the place where they laid him."	they saw three men emerge from the tomb, two of them supporting the other, with a cross following behind them. The heads of the two reached up to the sky, but the head of the one they were leading went up above the skies. And they heard a voice from the skies, "Have you preached to those who are asleep?" And a reply came from the cross, "Yes."
he appeared...	"But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him."	[The surviving text of the Gospel of Peter breaks off before Jesus appears to his disciples, but it looks as if the original text included such a scene.]

Second, Craig argues that the third day must refer to when the tomb was discovered empty, but it could just as easily refer to the time of the first appearances; indeed, it is taken as referring to both in the gospel accounts.

Craig has also argued that if Jesus was buried as Mark described, the disciples could not have proclaimed the resurrection if the tomb was full. Craig says Paul backs up Mark's story. However, that statement is not true; Paul simply says that Jesus was buried, failing to even address the question of whether he was buried in a tomb or a grave. In fact, absent contrary evidence, burial in a private tomb is an unlikely fate for an executed criminal. Craig himself, in his 1989 book on the resurrection, wrote that it was "most surprising" that, in the gospel stories, "instead of throwing the body into a shallow grave, Joseph lays the body in a rock tomb of the most expensive variety."⁹

Alternatively, Jesus' body could have been put in a communal tomb with the bodies of many other criminals.

The mere fact of the burial has also been used to argue that if Jesus was buried in such a way that the location of his body was known, the disciples could not have preached the resurrection unless his body was missing, because opponents would produce it. The problem with this view is if there was any delay in the preaching of the resurrection, Jesus' body would have been too rotted to be recognizable. Jeffery Jay Lowder, one critic of this argument, said he had contacted a pathologist who said it would only take "several days" for the face to be unrecognizable.¹⁰ It's quite possible that the disciples waited more than a few days before preaching the resurrection. The book of Acts indicates a delay of fifty days. Though this may be a symbolic number, it's not hard to see reasons why there may have been some delay, if, say, the disciples traveled to Galilee before preaching the resurrection, as Mark and Matthew indicate.

In an attempt to defend this argument, Gary Habermas and Michael Licona argued that Jesus' body could have been identified based on "hair, stature, and distinctive wounds."¹¹ Unfortunately, we have no evidence that Jesus was much taller or shorter than average or had a wild hair cut, and only John indicates his wounds were in any way distinctive. The weakness of this attempted rescue, I think, should mark the end of the "the Jews would have produced the body" argument.

No matter how much Craig wishes that "Paul's testimony guar-

antees the fact of the empty tomb,” it doesn’t even provide evidence for it. This is a poor start for a line of argument that is supposed to convince most scholars.

Argument from Jewish Polemic

Another one of Craig’s arguments is that in the “earliest Jewish propaganda,” the tomb story was not challenged. According to him, “The evidence is all the more powerful because it comes from the enemies of the Christian ‘heresy’ themselves.” As is perfectly clear in Craig’s writings, however, the evidence comes from Christian sources, mainly the author of Matthew. Craig argues that the story of the guards whom the Jewish leaders bribed to say they fell asleep is the result of a polemical exchange between Jews and Christians. His case, then, rests on the dubious assumption that a Christian author accurately presented the claims of enemies. Craig gives little hint of finding this problematic.

Suppose, however, that Matthew does paint an accurate portrait of the arguments of the Jews its writer was familiar with. Close analysis of this story casts serious question on whether the guard was really there, which in turn deprives Craig’s argument of its force.

Let’s start at the beginning of the story, with the Jewish leaders placing the guards at the tomb. Question: Why? According to the gospels, the disciples themselves didn’t know that Jesus would rise from the dead. Are we supposed to believe that the Jewish leaders were more attuned to what Jesus was saying than Jesus’ followers?

When it comes time for the discovery of the tomb, the author of Matthew has created a problem for himself: the guards are there, and now he has to get rid of them for the women’s visit. It’s worth quoting precisely how he does this:

“After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook

and became like dead men.

"The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

The plainest reading of this passage is that the angel came down while the women watched and delivered its message while sitting on the stone. Unfortunately, this contradicts Mark, who says that the stone was rolled back when the women arrived and the angel was inside the tomb. In order to harmonize this contradiction, apologists must claim that "went" means "headed out for," and that the angel came down when they were on their way. If so, why doesn't Matthew have a statement between verses 4 and 5 along the lines of "when the women got to the tomb, they found the angel inside"? More likely than not, the author of Matthew knew he was contradicting Mark for the sake of his guard story.

Next, we have the bribe. Some apologists, after simply assuming the historicity of the guard, have emphasized that the guard could not have actually been sleeping, in order to fend off theories that the body was stolen. Josh McDowell, for example, has argued that such a lapse of duty would have been punished with burning alive, and quotes one expert as saying "fear of punishment 'produced flawless attention to duty, especially in the night watches.'"¹² The difficulty here is that fear of punishment should have kept the guards from going around saying they had fallen asleep. Matthew shows some awareness of this when the Jewish leaders promise to satisfy the governor if he heard of the incident. After reading apologetic descriptions of Roman discipline, however, I am not persuaded that this would have been in the power of the leaders of a conquered province.

It's also worth asking why the Jewish leaders would offer a bribe in the first place. One would expect their response to the guard's story to be furious threats to make sure their execution takes place. The bribe

makes it sound as if the Jews believed the guards but wanted to hush things up anyway. I suppose the author of the account would say that the Jews covered up the resurrection because they're evil; Matthew, it should be noted, is the book in which the Jews declare "Let his blood be on us and our children!" Such thinking is reminiscent of claims that the U.S. government is covering up evidence of UFO abduction without any particular motive.

Rather than downplay the idea that Matthew contains such conspiratorial thinking, some of the arguments of apologists have actually made the situation worse. McDowell argues that the emptying of the tomb must have been a supernatural event because the Jewish authorities must have had evidence that it was, or else they would have accused the guards of sleeping on the job. Craig himself, in attempting to explain why the guard would spread a story for which they would be executed, widened the conspiracy by speculating that what the Jewish leaders promised to do was tell the governor the truth about the guard's service.¹³ That the Jews would believe the story and try to cover it up is bad enough; that the governor would get involved in the conspiracy is downright absurd.

Last, why isn't this story included in the other gospels? The story of the bribe and how this was uncovered (something Matthew doesn't explain) would make perfect sense to include in the Acts account of the early church, but it doesn't even appear there.

Craig admits the first and last problems I raised are serious, and his treatment of why the guards would take the bribe is implausible. However, he insists they are not decisive and says the issue of the guard should be left an "open question" because the Jews, rather than denying the presence of the guard, said the guards fell asleep.

Even on the assumption that Matthew gives us a fair picture of how at least some Jews responded to Christian claims, Craig fails to take seriously the possibility that the group of Jews our evangelist was dealing with had no idea what really happened. If so, they might indeed have made up implausible explanations for Christian miracle stories. In doing so, they would be no different than early 18th-century

writers who tried to come up with naturalistic explanations for every last one of Jesus' miracles rather than realize many could be legends. They also wouldn't be much different than the less informed critics of pseudoscience in the modern world. In listing common features of pseudoscience, James Randi wrote:

6. It is claimed that critics give poor or insufficient reasons for doubting reported paranormal events and are therefore not to be taken seriously. Unfortunately, this is sometimes true. Examples:... Some scientists today have put their skeptical feet in their mouths by remarking that [magician and fake-psychic Uri] Geller could have bent or broken metals by using chemicals, magnets, or laser beams. Such claims are nonsense to anyone who knows the conditions under which the "miracles" took place.¹⁴

And if this particular group of Jews didn't know enough to challenge the guard story, they probably wouldn't have challenged the tomb story even if it was a legend.

This would lend great support to what I suggested in the last chapter, that even fifty years after Jesus' death it may have been too late to easily expose legends as such. I hesitate at this conclusion somewhat, though. It is a common enough occurrence for polemicists to misrepresent opposing arguments and to ignore strong arguments in favor of rebutting weak ones. Matthew's author may have, for example, heard allegations that Jesus got a grave burial and decided to ignore them. Either way, the presence of the guard story doesn't increase the credibility of the empty tomb.

The Testimony of the Women

Another of Craig's arguments, perhaps one of the most common made in favor of the historicity of the empty tomb, is that if the story had been made up, Christians wouldn't have had women as the witnesses. The reason for this is that the testimony of women was not considered as reliable as that of men in that era.

The problem with this argument, a major problem with the entire story, is that the women weren't the ones testifying to the empty tomb—

at least not in the original story.

As noted in the last chapter, the original version of the Gospel of Mark probably ended with verse 16:8. This verse reads: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." This is a rather curious ending, for if they said nothing to anyone, how did the story come to be written down?

Craig insists that this was a temporary silence. This option would be more plausible if the other evangelists had used it. However, in Luke, the women tell the disciples before any appearances of Jesus were reported, and these happened that same day. John says Mary "came running to Simon Peter." If these aren't sufficiently explicit contradictions, Matthew says the women "hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples."

The fact is that Mark's ending is inexplicable on the theory that the story is historical, and later writers realized this. That's why the story was changed.

The proposals for why Mark ends the way it does are several. Many involve furthering some theme of the gospel, but one of the more interesting ones is that the empty tomb story was recent at time of Mark's writing, and the women's silence explains why it hadn't been heard before.

Against this view, Craig once rhetorically asked, "Mark's listeners are expected to believe that for thirty years no one in the Jerusalem church ever bothered to ask the women who tarried at the cross what happened afterwards, or that even *after* the resurrection appearances the women continued to stonewall?"¹⁵ In response, let me ask this question: Were they expected to believe that the sky went inexplicably dark for three hours, that the curtain of the temple was torn in two, and yet the Jewish leaders failed to be converted by such undeniable miracles? Going further, were Matthew's readers expected to believe the Jews would cover up the resurrection after the above two miracles as well as a mass-resurrection of saints? As with his insistence that Christians would have been careful in retelling stories about Jesus,

Craig underestimates human credulity.

If there is any doubt that people can be gotten to believe patently absurd legends, just consider some of the stories people will believe on no greater authority than an e-mail. In one Snopes.com article, Barbara Mikkelson lists seven different problems with an online ghost story, starting with the fact that a young girl was supposedly murdered while her older sister was either sleeping beside her or checking a noise at a window, but the sister only found out the younger girl was dead because the bed was wet and had a bad smell. After the list, she makes a comment: “If all this seems too silly to bother dissecting, we initially thought so too. Then we read this discussion at alexlab.com, which shows at least some folks have been taking the story somewhat seriously.”⁶

Considering the Alternative

I know of one scholar who insists that Mark’s ending, as well as a couple of other problematic points in the story, are Mark’s additions to a pre-Markan tomb-discovery story.¹⁷ His certainty puzzles me, but this is indeed a possibility. I would not take it seriously if the tomb story were impossible to explain as anything but a legend, but is there an alternative to legend and genuine miracle? Apologists regularly assert that even if one rejects Matthew’s guard story, the empty tomb is still inexplicable.

In *The Demon Haunted World*, Carl Sagan observed that the alleged “‘thousands’ of cases of ‘disturbed’ soil” is no evidence of extraterrestrial visitation because “there are ways of disturbing the soil other than by aliens in UFOs—humans with shovels is a possibility that springs readily to mind.”¹⁸ Likewise, there are other ways of emptying a tomb than by resurrection—*humans* is a possibility that springs readily to mind (and no shovels required, in this case). These humans need not have been the disciples.

Here’s one possibility that’s been defended by Jeffery Jay Lowder, founder of Internet Infidels: Joseph of Arimathea was not a follower of Jesus, as later gospels indicate, but rather a Jew who wanted to make sure laws requiring the burial of dead bodies were followed. However,

the tomb burial was a temporary one motivated by the need to bury the body by sundown, and Jesus was later buried in a criminals' graveyard. Lowder argues that this hypothesis is quite probable because it explains things that would otherwise be left unexplained: how Jesus was buried in a tomb rather than in a common grave or not at all, and the involvement of a member of the Sanhedrin.

Of course, this is just one possibility; there are other candidates for people who may have moved Jesus' body: the Jewish authorities, because they wanted to prevent tomb veneration; enemies, who stole the body out of spite; robbers, who believed that the body of a holy man would have magical properties; somebody wanting to perpetrate a crop-circle type hoax on the disciples.¹⁹

What makes such scenarios highly plausible is that there are numerous recorded instances of people coming across something that has a perfectly mundane explanation yet jumping to the conclusion that something extraordinary has happened. I already mentioned one example: crop circles. Another example is cattle mutilation. In summer of 1974 people began coming across dead cattle out in fields with the blood apparently drained and body parts such as the ears, mouth, and genitals missing. Many jumped to the conclusion that this was the work of either extraterrestrials or cultists. However, veterinarians who examined the bodies concluded that the animals had died of natural causes, the missing body parts were the work of predators, and the reason it looked as if the blood had been drained was that it had coagulated before anyone got to the cattle.²⁰ A third example is one which I must thank William Lane Craig for suggesting: spontaneous combustion. That claim is a matter of people finding charred corpses and jumping to the conclusion it could not have been an ordinary burning. Such behavior sounds ridiculous, but it happens, and when it does, the error is not always corrected effectively.

Craig has raised a number of objections to the general thesis that some unknown third party stole the body.²¹ One is that "there is no positive proof for this hypothesis, and to that extent it is a mere assertion." However, if one heard an Nth-hand report of spontaneous

combustion, would it be reasonable to demand proof that the victim had caught his or her self on fire in this particular case? No. Armed with the knowledge that such things happen, it would be sufficient to say that the report proves nothing. In fact, it would probably be impossible to determine whether it was a pipe, lantern, or fire place that was the source of flame, something that makes me reluctant to join people who attempt to make judgments of “this is probably who moved the body and why.”

Craig has raised a number of other objections, though I think only two are worth dealing with. One is that “Conspiracies such as this almost inevitably come to light eventually, either through discovery or disclosure or at least rumor.” A look at the case of crop circles casts doubt on this assumption. The original hoaxers kept silent about their work for fifteen years, and during the last ten of these they received heavy media coverage. They eventually decided to put an end to the nonsense, but many copy cats showed less interest in letting the public know the truth.

Moreover, for a long time the original hoaxers were motivated by the fact that people were taking them seriously. Jim Schnabel does an excellent job of showing just how seriously the circles were taken in his book *Round in Circles*. Many people, calling themselves “cereologists,” tried to study the circles closely. They wrote books. They debated whether the circles required a paranormal explanation or whether they could be the result of a bizarre natural phenomenon such as plasma vortices.

When the confession came, many hard-core “cereologists” kept on believing. For this reason, combined with poorer communication in the ancient world, we cannot assume that the truth would have gotten in the way of Christianity’s spread.²² At most, we might expect a dismissive reference to revelations of the truth in one of the gospels—indeed, one could argue that this is what John 20:13-16 represents. On the other hand, early Christians may have persuaded themselves that allegations of a third party moving the body merited no discussion.

According to Craig, “perhaps the most serious objection” to the hypothesis that a third party took the body “is that it seeks to explain

only half of the evidence, namely, the empty tomb, in isolation from the appearances.” While not disputing Craig’s assessment of the relative strengths of his arguments, let me say that this is a feeble objection. Compare it to this defense of the reality of alien abduction by Budd Hopkins, along with Philip Klass’ rebuttal:

Hopkins claims that “no [single] blanket explanation for the mass of similar reports—not even a tentative psychological theory—has ever been presented to me by first-hand investigators.”

That is hardly surprising inasmuch as there is “no [single] blanket explanation” for all reports of human illness, nor a single explanation for why some people commit crimes, or a single explanation for why television sets malfunction.²³


Klass goes on to discuss waking dreams and false memories. By William Lane Craig’s logic, however, these must be condemned because both explanations only seek to “explain half the evidence”—waking dreams only explain night encounters reported without hypnosis, while false memories only explain cases of “recovered” memory. The situation is actually worse than Klass’ discussion would suggest, because alien abduction reports aren’t the only phenomena attributed to extraterrestrials. We also have UFO sightings, the vanishing of David Lang, crop circles, cattle mutilations, pictures and video tape of UFOs, and one tape that appeared on FOX in 1995 supposedly showing an alien autopsy. These require an array of explanations: misidentifications, legend, hoax, and predators. Explanations can remain complicated when the question is narrowed down. There is no one cause of UFO sightings; rather, their causes include planets, advertising aircraft, rocket reentry, and weather balloons. Craig’s objection could even be used in an apparently simple case such as cattle mutilations. The first cases were accompanied by sightings of UFOs as well as sightings of a mysterious “thing” in the area (see *Cattle Mutilations: An Episode of Collective Delusion* by Stewart). Only one explanation accounts for all the evidence: The “thing” was an extraterrestrial which had ridden in by UFO to mutilate the cattle. That is obviously not necessarily the best explanation, however.

It could be objected that in the case of various phenomena attributed to UFOs, the various terrestrial explanations can be independently established. However, the main reason we cannot positively establish explanations for the resurrection is because the evidence is so sketchy. Most of it is not even second hand, and for the first 60 years of Christianity's history none of our sources are hostile. We cannot perform the type of investigation that is often necessary to uncover the truth about modern paranormal claims; that is to say we cannot go back in time and give psychological evaluations to the disciples or interview those involved in burying Jesus. This lack of information must be a reason for skepticism, not credulity.

Here, we see the limits of this sort of analysis. I am reasonably confident that Jesus' followers experienced ghost-type apparitions of him after his death, and even that Jesus had a career as a faith-healer similar to modern examples. I am not so confident that his tomb was actually found empty, or who emptied it if it was. However, our knowledge of the results of modern paranormal investigations is a good basis for guessing, in broad terms, what would happen if we could perform such an investigation into the beginnings of Christianity.

Chapter 8

The Shroud of Turin

he Shroud of Turin is a fourteen by three and a half foot linen bearing the image of a crucified Jesus which first surfaced in the fourteenth century. The shroud once played a sizeable role in apologetic defenses of the resurrection. It is the subject of two books by Gary Habermas, co-authored with Kenneth Stevenson: *Verdict on the Shroud* in 1981 and *The Shroud and Controversy* in 1990. Of all the books Habermas has written defending the resurrection, *Verdict* is the only one listed as an international best seller on Habermas' website.¹ After reading *Verdict*, Norman Geisler declared the Shroud of Turin to be the "best evidence in the 20th century for a 1st century miracle."² The shroud also appears in William Lane Craig's early work on the resurrection.³ The shroud's importance has considerably diminished in recent years, but having raised the issue of scientific evidence in chapter Two, I think it's worth discussing this (alleged) relic.

Habermas' 1981 book was largely propelled by the work of a group called the Shroud of Turin Research Project (STURP). Formed in 1977, the group examined the shroud and announced findings supporting its authenticity. Kenneth Stevenson was a member, though Habermas and Stevenson's book came with a disclaimer saying that the book's claims did not necessarily represent the conclusions of STURP. Central to these claims was an argument that the shroud provided evidence for the resurrection because the image it bears could only have been produced by a miraculous burst of light at the time of the resurrection.

What follows is, for the most part, an account of a debate long

settled. I will be giving most of my attention to Habermas' work defending the shroud. This is one issue where skeptical investigators of the paranormal have spent considerable time clashing with Christian apologists, and as such I will be relying heavily on the work of Joe Nickell. Sometimes, however, the problems with Habermas' work are too obvious to require expert comment.

The Provenance of the Shroud

Whenever dealing with a piece of hard evidence, the question of provenance is crucial. Put in layman's terms, was the thing found where one would expect, or does the source it was produced from cast doubt on its authenticity?

A case in point is the MJ-12 documents, which purported to be government documents proving that an alien spacecraft had in fact crashed in Roswell in 1947 and that President Truman knew about it. They were presented to the public in 1987 by William L. Moore, who had previously written a book on the Roswell incident, and two of his associates, Stanton Friedman and Jamie Shandera. How did Moore and his colleagues explain having gotten a hold of these documents? They said they had simply appeared in Shandera's mailbox one day from an anonymous sender. Unsurprisingly, close examination of the documents showed numerous signs of forgery, from the idiosyncratic dating system to "Truman"'s style of writing to a signature that appeared to have been photocopied from another document.⁴

Scientific findings against the Shroud of Turin's authenticity were similarly foreshadowed by a dubious provenance. Not only do we have Pierre d'Arcis' letter to Pope Clement VII declaring the shroud a forgery, but this was a time when forged relics were common. In the words of one wit, there were enough pieces of the True Cross floating around to build Noah's Ark. Furthermore, there is no record of the shroud's existence prior to the 14th century, when d'Arcis wrote his letter. The first known owner of the shroud made no attempt to explain how he got it. His son claimed it was a gift, while his granddaughter claimed it was a spoil of war.⁵ It is difficult to imagine how a piece of evidence

could be of more dubious origins than the Shroud of Turin.

Shroud proponents have not ignored this issue.⁶ Rather, they have attempted to furnish the shroud with a history using wild speculations that immediately recalled Robert M. Price's devastating critique of the historical "research" behind *The Da Vinci Code*: "Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln constantly connect the dots of data provided by medieval chronicles, etc., linking them with one speculation after another: 'What if A were really B?' 'What if B were really C?' 'It is not impossible that...' 'If so-and-so were the case, this would certainly explain that and that.'... We are familiar with this logic from tabloid theories that space aliens built the pyramids."⁷

The theory that was advanced by proponents of the shroud involved assuming that it was identical with a different relic known as the Holy Mandylion. This was a cloth bearing only an image of Jesus' face, but no matter, shroud proponents propose that the shroud had been folded up and put in a frame so that only the face was visible. However, the Mandylion is itself of dubious provenance, having been found in Edessa in 525 A.D., and there is considerable gap between its disappearance and the appearance of the shroud. The Mandylion disappeared during the sack of Constantinople in 1204, leaving a one and a half century gap between it and the shroud.

How did the Mandylion get to Edessa in the first place? Habermas and Stevenson cite a legend telling of how King Abgar of Edessa wrote a letter to Jesus seeking a cure for a chronic illness. Jesus was unable to come, but after his death a disciple visited the king with a cloth bearing Jesus' image. This story is highly dubious in light of such legends as Fat Judas and the Three Deaths of Matthew, as well as the fact that Jesus does not seem to have been the type to exchange letters with distant royalty. If there is any connection between the Abgar legend and the "discovery" of the Mandylion in 525, it is probably that the legend inspired somebody to forge the relic.

Even if the Mandylion were authentic, there would still be little reason to suppose it is identical to the shroud. The simplest explanation for its disappearance is that it was destroyed when Constantinople was

sacked. Shroud proponents have another theory, however, and like those of Dan Brown *et. al.*, it involves the Knights of Templar. They propose that the Mandylion was entrusted to the Knights and given to its first known owner, Geoffrey de Charny, by a family member belonging to the Templars named Geoffrey de Charnay (note the slightly different spelling). Charnay was executed in 1314 when the Templars were suppressed, leaving a gap of a few decades in pro-authenticity speculations about the shroud's history. The familial connection between the two Geoffreys is entirely speculative. Furthermore, Habermas and Stevenson admit that:

*It is, in large part, an argument from historical silence—the weakest of all historical arguments. If the Shroud and the Mandylion are the same, and if the cloth lay hidden for 150 years in Europe or the Near East, the secretive Knights Templar were the one group that could have hidden it.*⁸

If one assumes the shroud is authentic, this provides a perfectly logical argument for the Knights Templar having kept it. With the shroud's authenticity in serious doubt, however, the Knights Templar proposal is nothing more than a last-ditch attempt to save a dubious theory.

Shroud proponents also try to downplay the significance of d'Arcis' letter to the pope.⁹ Habermas and Stevenson first attack the bishop's motives by saying he had been outraged by the fact that the Charnys had bypassed him in exhibiting the shroud. However, as Joe Nickell points out, he may have been bypassed because they knew he knew the shroud was fake.¹⁰ They also take Pope Clement's order for d'Arcis to keep silent as evidence of the shroud's genuineness, but it is at least as plausible that the pope was motivated by a desire to avoid embarrassment. Anyway, the pope ordered the shroud be displayed only as a representation of the true shroud, showing he in fact agreed at least partially with d'Arcis.¹¹

There is one other historical problem for the shroud's authenticity, a problem first raised in the 14th century: the gospels make no reference to a miraculous image on Jesus' burial clothes. In their 1990 book, Hab-

ermas and Stevenson seem to suggest that the disciples were reluctant to talk about the shroud because they saw grave clothes as unclean, though this does not fit so well with the suggestion that one disciple was willing to use it as a witness to the resurrection.¹²

In Habermas' 1985 debate on the resurrection with philosopher Anthony Flew, he claimed that "numerous historical references connect the shroud with a likely first century origin," implying that the attempt to furnish the shroud with a history was actually evidence for the shroud's authenticity.¹³ After reading Habermas' books on the shroud, I am at a loss to understand this claim.

Scientific Dating: pre-1988

Alongside his "numerous historical references," Habermas also claimed two other pieces of evidence supporting a first-century date: coins and pollen. Close examination of the image supposedly revealed imprints of coins minted by Pilate around the time of Jesus' execution. Also, criminologist and STURP member Max Frei claimed to have found pollens from a number of locations where the shroud has not been since the 14th century, including Palestine. If the pollen is truly there, it would have had to have been picked up prior to its surfacing in the hands of Geoffrey de Charny.

On the first count, some scientists who have seen the photographs of the eye indicated they didn't see anything (with one sarcastically commenting that you can also see Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse).¹⁴ In other words, the coins in the image quickly turn out to be as imaginary as the coin lettering discussed in chapter Two. The discussion of this claim in the 1990 book takes a somewhat weak position, saying three times that "something" is present, saying that it's probably coins, but omitting the claim that this supports a 1st century date.¹⁵

In 1983, Joe Nickell made two points against the pollen argument.¹⁶ First, it might have been the result of the cloth having been imported. Second, when other STURP members took tape samples from the shroud, they did not find as much pollen as Frei did. Questions about Frei's credibility prompted one scientist to call for careful independent

examination of Frei's claims. However, Habermas and Stevenson proposed that Frei may have found more pollen because he used a better mechanism of collecting it.¹⁷ This, as best I can determine, is where the pollen issue stood in 1988, though there one later development which I discuss shortly.

The Image on the Shroud

Modern attempts to prove that the shroud is not a forgery began in 1898 when the shroud was photographed for the first time. The photographer, Secondo Pia, was surprised to find that the negative of the image looked more realistic than the image itself. This led the shroud's image being widely touted as "photo-negative," a claim which formed the basis for the argument that no forger would have any reason to produce such an image before the invention of photography.

Some have suggested, though, that the image is better described as "quasi-negative." Trying to interpret it as a normal photographic negative would suggest that Jesus was a gray-bearded old man. The darkness of a part of the image is dependent on the prominence of the part; for example, the eyebrows, nose, cheeks, and beard are the darkest part of the face. A forger may have created such an image to suggest that the body had been in contact with the cloth.

However, the image on the shroud could not have actually been produced by contact with a body. Such an image would be greatly distorted in a manner similar to the distortions found in map projections.

Joe Nickell has proposed a technique that could account for the quasi-negative effect without much distortion: draping the linen over a bas-relief and rubbing it with powdered pigment. This would explain much about the image on the shroud, and Nickell in fact used it to create a rough replica of the shroud.

Nickell notes that artists' copies of the shroud point to the shroud's image once having been much darker than it is today. Most of the pigment may have fallen off, leaving the image on the shroud today, which consists of degraded fibers and can only be seen from a distance, much like some modern artwork. This fits with the use of pigment, because

degradation of the cellulose of the linen fibers can be promoted by a variety of foreign substances.

This is not to say that there is no longer any pigment on the shroud. Key evidence comes from the work of the late Walter McCrone, a microanalyst who had been involved in authenticating paintings for art galleries as well as exposing as fraudulent a letter attributed to Christopher Columbus and a map of Vinland which was supposed to prove that the Vikings had been to America before Columbus. McCrone examined sticky tape samples and found a small amount of iron oxide which shared properties with iron earth pigment. Furthermore, this was discovered only on the parts of the shroud containing the image. A small amount of iron oxide certainly could have gotten on the shroud accidentally, but the fact that it was not found on the parts of the shroud without the image indicates that the iron oxide was originally used to produce the image.¹⁸

Habermas and Stevenson try hard to refute Nickell's proposal, but they ignore his arguments on major points. Among the arguments still touted as decisive refutations in their 1990 book is a forger could not produce a directionless image (i.e. without brush strokes) and Nickell's work lacks the three dimensional data found in the shroud.¹⁹ However, Nickell reported that his technique did in fact produce a directionless image.²⁰ Nickell also observes that attempts to reconstruct a three-dimensional image of the man in the shroud initially produce a reconstruction "scarcely recognizable as anything human" which can only be turned into a reasonable 3D image with a series of "corrective" procedures. These corrections make sense only on the assumption that there is meaningful 3D data to be found, making the entire argument question-begging.²¹ *The Shroud and Controversy* does quote another critic making the charge of circularity, but it is met only with repletion of previous claims; in effect, argument by assertion.²²

Given the countless number of forged relics during the middle ages, it wouldn't be terribly surprising if we were unable to determine the techniques used to produce every last one of them. We once did not know exactly how the pyramids were built. In the case of the Shroud of

Turin, however, a reasonable hypothesis exists. Any slight discrepancies found between replicas and the original would be no more significant than discrepancies between crop-circle recreations by skeptics and “authentic” crop circles. A similar observation was made by forensic writer Colin Evans in his discussion of the shroud: “History is littered with puzzles and artifacts that defy analysis—the pyramids at Teotihuacán in Mexico; Stonehenge; and the statues on Easter Island, for instance—and only the most fanciful would attribute any of these to mystical intercession.”²³ Considerably more significant is the presence of iron oxide on the image, but not the rest of the shroud. I hope we are not expected to suppose that God involved a common pigment when He miraculously imprinted the shroud.

The 1988 Carbon Dating and Beyond

Carbon dating from the shroud was delayed for a number of reasons, including the fact that carbon dating would require destroying a small part of the shroud. Early versions of the test would have required more material than anyone thought reasonable to remove, but refinements in carbon-dating techniques allowed scientists to date the shroud using a 1 cm x 7 cm strip that was cut into three smaller pieces and distributed to labs in Arizona, Oxford, and Zurich. The tests were conducted in 1988 and the results published in *Nature* in February 1989.²⁴ The group reported with 95% certainty that the shroud dated from 1260-1390. They also successfully dated three control samples with known dates, though here I must observe that given the historical data discussed above, the shroud’s date was only marginally less uncertain than the dates of the other samples. In retrospect, the carbon dating seems anti-climactic. It was important in swaying some, however. William Lane Craig, for example, quickly conceded that the shroud is a forgery in his 1989 book.²⁵

None of this stopped Gary Habermas from taking part in the shroud’s continued defense, though he seems to have been more troubled than some shroud proponents. He participated in writing the second book with Kenneth Stevenson, though in it he mentions having

become more skeptical of the shroud's authenticity. In his 1996 book *The Historical Jesus*, where he could speak only for himself, he spells his position out in more detail.²⁶ There, Habermas repeats a number of alleged problems with the carbon dating and argues "virtually all the other shroud data stand in opposition to the medieval dating," and therefore "a medieval date has not, at present, been proven," but "it must be admitted that the 1988 carbon dating is still a serious objection to the shroud being the burial garment of Jesus."

What of the problems with carbon dating? The second sentence of *The Shroud and Controversy's* chapter on the subject makes an off-handed reference to the "controversial" nature of carbon dating—as if the problem extends beyond this specific test. The authors lodge some general complaints against the process, but I couldn't help think that something was missing and recall the doctrinal statement of Habermas' university: "*We affirm that... The universe was created in six historical days...*"²⁷

Knowing about the statement did not prepare me for reading the last chapter of the book, which contains a rant against evolution designed to show that scientists who reach conclusions unfavorable to Christianity are not to be trusted. The rant includes this sentence:

On the other hand, when two leading theorists of modern evolutionary thought, Dr. Stephen Jay Gould and Dr. Nils Eldredge admit that the "trade secret" of paleontologists has been that transitional fossils do not exist and then leap to a totally bizarre theory of punctuated equilibria, which requires the first bird to hatch from a lizard's egg, could we not suggest intellectual bias of the worst order?

I was so stunned by this statement that I actually dropped the book. Had Habermas and Stevenson bothered to read some of Gould's work rather than relying on a creationist writer for their information, they might have discovered what Gould's theory really says:

"[T]he process of speciation takes thousands or tens of thousands of years. This amount of time, so long when measured against our lives, is a geological microsecond. It represents much less than 1 per

cent of the average life-span for a fossil invertebrate species—more than ten million years.”

This quote comes from an essay where Gould also explains that, *“Transitional forms are generally lacking at the species level, but they are abundant between larger groups.”*²⁸

Shakespeare could not have engineered a better example of dramatic irony. In their attempt to show that their opponents are not to be trusted, Habermas and Stevenson demonstrate that they are happy to spout off on scientific issues without having the slightest clue what they are talking about, and are therefore not to be trusted.

Many of the complaints against the radiocarbon dating are easily debunked. For example, could it have been the result of contamination? No, a simple calculation shows that there would have had to have been twice as much contamination to the shroud to throw the date off by thirteen centuries.²⁹ In *The Historical Jesus*, an apparently desperate Habermas floats the theory that the carbon ratios of the shroud were miraculously altered by the resurrection. This is a classic example of pseudoscientific rationalization. When such “explanations” are allowed, no possible real evidence can count against the shroud’s authenticity.

The evidence that supposedly contradicts the carbon dating mostly consists of what has been discussed above: pollens, coins, and the attempt to give the shroud a pre-1300’s history. There is one development here that should be noted: after the carbon dating, the pollen tapes collected by Max Frei (who had died in 1983) were acquired from his family and examined. Walter McCrone was involved in the examination, and found that there was very little pollen on the tapes, except for a few square millimeters with a large amount of pollen. McCrone concluded that these pollens were probably not from the shroud, and he could see no reason for their presence except fraud. He also revealed that the Swiss police hierarchy had repeatedly found Frei guilty of “overenthusiastic interpretation of his evidence.”³⁰ For this reason, the pollen data can no longer be considered even weak evidence contradicting the carbon dating.


Conclusion

Such is the story of what was once called the “best evidence” for the resurrection. Unsurprisingly, it no longer appears much in the apologetic literature. Norman Geisler, the very man who gave it the “best evidence” tag, now strongly recommends that apologists not appeal to it.³¹ The most recent apologetic reference to the shroud I know of was from Michael Licona’s debate with Richard Carrier, but it was really used as a throw-away response to Carrier’s claim that there was no scientific evidence for the resurrection: Licona put it in the hypothetical (“if the shroud is authentic...”) and didn’t elaborate at all (and gave no attempt to refute the carbon dating).³² I think it’s safe to say that the shroud is now a dead issue.

Here, one further observation should be made. As has been observed, the documentary evidence for the resurrection cannot be tested by interviewing eyewitnesses, digging through archives, or visiting the site of the events looking for physical evidence. In short, it is not open to the sort of investigation that rational people demand before accepting such extraordinary claims. Tools like carbon dating, however, have allowed us to give the Shroud of Turin the scrutiny it deserves. It is the only piece of evidence in the apologetic arsenal that can be subjected to such scrutiny, and the shroud does not hold up under it.

Chapter 9

Jesus, the Jewish Messiah?

o start this chapter, I want to briefly consider one last argument for Jesus' resurrection. William Lane Craig argues that the Jews of Jesus' time "had no conception of a dying, much less a rising, Messiah" and that nothing but a miracle could explain how they came to believe something so unusual.¹

To evaluate the strength of this argument, I recommend reflecting on the great variety of strange beliefs that humans have held throughout history. Many of these beliefs have already been mentioned. Here are a few more:²

1. The belief that in ancient times, extraterrestrials visited Earth to give humans the technology they needed to build various architectural wonders, such as the ancient pyramids (promoted in Erich von Däniken's book *Chariots of the Gods*).
2. The belief that the war between God and Lucifer began on a distant planet called Car and involved nuclear weapons (held by a 1950's UFO cult).
3. The belief that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are two separate beings. The former created the world, while the latter had nothing to do with the world before Jesus, and came into the world to save people from the vengefulness of the Old Testament God (second-century Christian heresy).

4. The belief that there are ethereal “Akashic Records” containing information on all events past, present, and future (tenet of Theosophy, a religion that originated in the 19th century).
5. The belief that all diseases can be diagnosed by examining a person’s iris (“iridology”).
6. The belief that there are “E-rays” that come up from the center of the earth through “hot spots.” Knowing the location of these hot spots is quite important because E-rays are cancer-causing, but these spots can only be detected by dowsers (originated in modern Germany).
7. The belief that a person’s character traits can be determined by facial features. (“Physiognomy,” an idea popular in 19th century.)
8. The belief that a strange rock formation found off the coast of Bimini was in fact a road built by the lost civilization of Atlantis (originated in 1968).
9. The belief that diseases can be cured by substances that cause their symptoms (a tenet of homeopathy).
10. The belief that the Sun is inhabited.
11. The belief that the Earth is a hollow sphere with a civilization on the inside, and UFOs are vehicles produced by that civilization.
12. The belief that the Earth is a hollow sphere with a civilization on the inside, and we are that civilization (proposed in 1870 by one Cyrus Teed).

Plainly, human beings are quite good at coming up with strange beliefs. I don’t claim to have the slightest clue how any of the above ideas came to be. Well, okay, number three may have had something to do with comparing New Testament commands to love one’s enemies to Old Testament commands to kill the children of one’s enemies (see Leviticus 31:17, Deuteronomy 20:16, I Samuel 15:3). But I don’t know where the other ideas came from. Plainly, however, the fact that we do not know how people got an idea does not make it true.

This is not an argument desperately in need of refutation. I bring it up mainly because Craig’s statement that the Jews had no notion of a Messiah such as Jesus makes an excellent segue into discussing apolo-

getic arguments based on Messianic prophecies. Apologists regularly claim that Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies are proof of his divinity. Such claims are generally accompanied by impressive statistics, including that Jesus fulfilled 61 or 191 or 300 prophecies, or the odds of fulfilling all of those prophecies by chance are 1 in 10^{15713} . We shall see that when applied to the area of Biblical prophecy, Craig's attempted proof of Christianity turns out to be a damning admission.

Understanding why this is so requires a brief foray into the world of another prophecy claim: the prophecies of Nostradamus. Volumes have been written about the supposed prophecies of this 16th century seer. Among those who have gotten in on the game is Orson Wells, who in 1938 caused a panic with his radio production of *War of the Worlds*. Much later in life, in 1981, he narrated a similarly panic-inducing production, in this case a film, on the prophecies of Nostradamus—though this was presented as fact.

The film opens with a bold statement that it will be examining prophecies of such great matters as the Kennedys and the French Revolution, as well as three "Antichrists"—Napoleon, Hitler, and another man who is yet to come. Wells claimed that over 50% of Nostradamus' prophecies have been fulfilled, an impressive track record, if true.

Among the 30 supposed French revolution prophecies is the fact that the republic would not permit exit to the king, that something would happen involving a tile works (which happened to be the name of the king's palace). Predictions are given relating to the king's flight, trials, and execution.

For Napoleon, the list of fulfillments is long: An emperor would be born near Italy and be thought more of a butcher than a prince. He would rise from being a simple soldier to the rank of emperor. A passage about "swarms of bees" is taken to refer to Napoleon's beehive crest. He would reign for 14 years and have a name never before held by a French king. He would lead a great troop through Russia and destroy a city. Exhausted ones would die in the White Territory—a reference, Wells says, to his retreat through the Russian ice. Then, in a passage taken to refer to Napoleon's exile to Elba, it is said that he

would exchange a great empire for a small one. Nostradamus is also said to have predicted Napoleon's hundred day return and defeat at Waterloo. A key reference to Waterloo is that a leopard and boar would meet on the battlefield. Napoleon's opponent, the Duke of Wellington, was known as the leopard of England.

Countless further prophecies are given: The abdication of Edward the 8th, his replacement by George the 6th, and his move to France in the aftermath. Others include the discovery of the New World, the American Revolution, and the fact that the American Revolution would precede the French Revolution by 15 years. Lincoln's assassination is mentioned, along with the fact that he would be a great lawgiver who would rise up from humble origins and defeat rebels. The Kennedy assassination is predicted, along with the fact that it would also be predicted by a modern prophet (Jeanne Dixon) and the business of the "grassy knoll" from which the real assassin supposedly shot.

Then Wells describes prophecies related to technological advances: hot air balloons, the space age, and submarines. The last of these is predicted with the following lines: "The fleet shall swim underwater," "The eye of the sea watches like a greedy dog" (an anticipation of the periscope), and "the iron fish will wage war."

The next subject is Adolf Hitler, the Aryan who would have "the most horrible throne ever known." Nostradamus says that his "tongue shall seduce many," he would be the "captain of Germany," would have "crosses of iron, topsy turvey." With this third quotation comes a video clip of iron swastikas. Predictions are given for the furnaces of the concentration camps, the failure of the League of Nations, the Battle of Britain, and Londoners taking refuge in the subway. Quotations are also given for the means by which WWII would end: the use of the atomic bomb.

The last set of already fulfilled prophecies relate to Iran: a great faith would betray the monarch (the shah of Iran). The coup would be launched from France, and to France the shah would flee.

At this point in watching the video, I might have become a believer in the power of Nostradamus—if I hadn't had an idea of what was

coming next.

Orson Wells begins by darkly warning that the prophecies of the future “are not comforting.” There was to be worldwide drought and famine in the coming decade. Numerous natural disasters would rock the world: a cataclysmic earthquake somewhere in America in May 1988, a great flood, and so forth. All this would lead up to World War III, which was to begin in 1994. It would involve a man described as a “king of terror,” a resurrected Mongol ruler, who would come to Europe in a blue turban from Greater Arabia. The spread of Islam through Russia was to give this ruler access to Russian nuclear weapons, which would be used on New York City in 1999. The war was to last twenty seven years and was to be ended by a U.S.–Soviet alliance.

Oops.

At first glance, it would seem that Nostradamus’ ability suddenly faltered in 1981. Wells had added a hopeful note that the prophecies may have been given so that the disasters could be averted, but it is difficult to see what his video did to stop the rise of an Arab military leader in 1994. It is even more difficult to see what human actions might have prevented the countless natural disasters that Nostradamus was said to have predicted. What happened here?

Very simply, Nostradamus did not have an ounce of prophetic power. He simply managed to capture the general imagination, so that whenever a major event happens, people find something in his prophecies that can be fit to the event. To see how this happens, one only need compare Wells’ video to what people have been saying about Nostradamus in the last few years. I remember reading, circa 1995, a pro-paranormal magazine which, rather than predicting a 20 year war starting in 1994, indicated something like the end of the world in 2004. Prophecies previously thought to refer to the destruction of New York have been turned into prophecies of the September 11th attacks.⁴ And the momentous event that was supposed to have taken place in 1999? Some have suggested it refers to an unusual astronomical event.⁵

Similar things can be seen further back in the literature on Nostradamus. For example, Charles A. Ward’s *The Oracles of Nostradamus*,

published in the 19th century, contains nothing on World War II. A 1949 book on the seer assigned over 20 of the first 100 prophecies to the event.

Oftentimes, the attempts at specific predictions sound far more plausible than the after-the-fact interpretations. Many later interpretations are undoubtedly dubious, or the fit is so loose as to be meaningless. For example, the line about the “emperor born near Italy” could apply to countless men besides Napoleon—“near Italy” makes up most of Europe. The reference to “Hister” is probably not really a reference to Hitler, but rather a part of the River Danube, which actually is called “Hister” or “Ister.” Note here that hard-core devotees of Nostradamus can always persuade themselves that the after-the-fact interpretation is the only correct one. For example, one book on Nostradamus admits that “Hister” could refer to the Danube, but insists that changing one letter was “a common anagrammer’s ploy in the 1500s” and “the context indicates a person.”⁶ This is worth keeping in mind when considering Christian interpretations of Old Testament prophecies.

The most important thing that comes out of this is that if an alleged prophecy cannot be correctly interpreted until after the fact, it is basically worthless. Now we see what is so damning about the William Lane Craig quote that I began the chapter with: it shows that if Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, the prophecies about him were not correctly interpreted in advance. Therefore, the apologetic argument that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies fails.

Really so Different?

Of course, Christian apologists often insist that Biblical prophecy far outdoes the prophecies of Nostradamus or modern psychics. Their treatments tend to be somewhat superficial, but can be interesting nonetheless. Norman Geisler, for example, has cited studies of seventy-two prophecies made by psychics in 1975 that found only six were fulfilled.⁷ This, he thinks, proves prophecies by psychics are nothing like Biblical prophecies. This argument manages to be right on and dead wrong at the same time. It’s right on in that the study he cites used exactly the

right methodology for testing predictions: get a list of specific predictions and see if they pan out. It's dead wrong in that the comparison is bogus. The lists of 61 or 191 or 300 prophecies that apologists bandy about were not compiled by rabbis before Jesus was born, but rather were compiled by Christians long after the fact.

If a rabbi had sat down to compile the Bible's messianic predictions before Jesus' birth, his list could easily have looked like this:

- Isaiah 11: This section begins with the words "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him..." This passage is used by apologists in connection with Jesus' alleged descent with Jesse (David's father). Unfortunately, the passage also says, "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them." None of this accompanied Jesus' coming.
- Isaiah 16:4-5: These verses describe "a ruler who seeks justice." This ruler will appear "When the oppressor is no more, and destruction has ceased, and marauders have vanished from the land." Israel was heavily oppressed by Rome in Jesus' day.
- Isaiah 42:1-4: These verses describe a servant of God whom God will put his spirit on. The fourth verse says "He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth." I do not know of any Christian theology which claims Jesus "established justice in the earth" before the crucifixion, though I assume he would have been somewhat faint after the beating that preceded it.
- Jeremiah 23:5-6: Describes a "righteous Branch" that God will "raise up for David." Like Isaiah 11, this is used as a prediction of Jesus' Davidic descent. Like Isaiah 11, this doesn't work well either: "In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety."
- Jeremiah 33:14-18: This repeats the prediction of Jeremiah 23:5-6, and adds, "the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to make grain offerings, and to make sacrifices for all time."

- Ezekiel 34:23-31: Describes a David-type figure. When he comes, there will be peace, no more wild animals, and no more hunger.
- Ezekiel 37:21-28: The David-figure is described again. At about the time of his coming, Jews will be gathered up from all the places they have gone. But in fact the events following Jesus' death lead to further scattering of Jews.
- Micah 5:2-5: Describes "one who is to rule in Israel." He will come from Bethlehem—a point for Jesus if only we could trust the Bethlehem stories. However, this passage also says that his people "shall live secure" and "If the Assyrians come into our land and tread upon our soil we will raise against them seven shepherds and eight installed as rulers... they shall rescue us from the Assyrians if they come into our land or tread within our border." The Assyrians may not have been a big problem in Jesus' time, but Jesus failed to provide the general security implied in this passage.

The Jesus of the gospels only fits the above picture on two points: Davidic descent and Bethlehem birth. However, these are two of the points on which the gospels' reliability is most seriously in doubt. Even if the gospels were here, the other parts of these messianic prophecies would create a real problem for Christianity. The only real response is to suppose that these things will happen during the second coming. Pause to reflect on this. The idea that the messiah will come once and be killed and then come a second time is difficult if not impossible to extract from the Old Testament. I actually don't know of any instances of a Christian writer doing so. Where does this idea come from, then?

A little reflection makes the answer clear: the idea of a second coming was invented by early Christians mainly because Jesus did not fulfill many key messianic prophecies. If he had, the *Left Behind* books probably would not exist. Imagine that: a best-selling series spawned by Jesus' failure to meet messianic predictions.

While keeping all of the above in mind, it's worth taking a look at the lists of prophecies put forth by Christian apologists as evidence of Christianity. In light of what I have said above, the prophecies would

have to be impressive indeed to overcome the fact that they were not correctly interpreted in advance and that there are messianic prophecies in the Old Testament apparently unfulfilled by Jesus. However, many of the prophecies do not have the slightest degree of plausibility. They are entirely the product of apologetic wishful thinking.

A prime example is the Genesis 3:15 “prophecy,” which serves as the first entry in Josh McDowell’s list of 61 prophecies that Jesus fulfilled. Here is exactly how McDowell presents it:

1. Born of the Seed of a Woman

PROPHECY

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” – Genesis 3:15

FULFILLMENT

*“But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law.” – Galatians 4:4
(See also Matt. 1:20)⁸*

Not to brag, but I myself have a mother. Furthermore, when Genesis 3:15 is read in context, it proves to be an obvious example of a myth designed to explain a fact about the natural world, namely that snakes are a considerable nuisance to humans. How McDowell could consider the verse prophetic should baffle any reader who approaches his book with even a drop of critical thinking. It is not until a hundred and twenty pages later that McDowell explains he thinks it is a reference to the virgin birth. This is even more of a stretch than the initial application to Jesus.

A few pages after the initial citation of this “prophecy,” McDowell rebuts the charge that Biblical prophecies resemble psychic prophecies with a long quotation of Geisler’s treatment of the issue (already mentioned).⁹ The quotation, among other things, argues that prophecies made by psychics are vague. The situation is so absurdly ironic that it could only happen in real life.

Most of McDowell’s other prophecy claims are similarly far-fetched.

Fully 25 of the 61 come from the Psalms. The Psalms express such a great variety of situations and human emotions that it is hardly surprising to find some that echo the life of Jesus. Many do not contain a hint of messianic intent. Some refer to a king, but they might refer to a contemporary king. If they are taken as messianic, some would cause further problems for Christianity. For example, McDowell cites Psalm 72:10 as predicting the visit of the Magi with their gifts.¹⁰ This requires ignoring verse 16, which associates abundant grain with this king. Clearly the Psalm deals with an earthly ruler, whether present or future. Once again, one verse is selected as prophetic while surrounding verses are ignored.

Psalm 22 is used as a prediction of the crucifixion. This is especially true for verse 16, which McDowell quotes from the New King James Version as “They pierced My hands and My feet.”¹¹ Unfortunately, it is not exactly clear what was supposed to have happened to the psalmist’s feet. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) comes with a footnote that the meaning is uncertain and proposes “shriveled” as a translation, while the Jewish Publication Society’s translation gives “maul my hands and feet.” Also, once again, nearby verses have been ignored. In verse 12 the speaker talks of being encircled by bulls. If this ever happened to Jesus, the gospels do not record the event. Once, when I brought this problem up with a street evangelist, he said that the bulls were demons that encircled and taunted Jesus when he was on the cross. Of course if a problem can be dismissed by saying the prophecy was metaphorically fulfilled in an invisible realm, Biblical verses can be made to prophesy about anyone.

Space does not permit a treatment of every last prophecy in McDowell’s list of 61, much less of the list of 300 that I have heard of. Let me finish with McDowell’s claims, though, by dealing with the most famous alleged Jesus prophecy: Isaiah 7:14, which is used by the book of Matthew as a prediction of the virgin birth.

The first problem here is that many modern scholars have questioned whether “virgin” is the proper translation of Isaiah 7:14. The Hebrew word used here is *alma*. Some argument can be made for translating

the word as “virgin,” but everyone seems to agree the verse would be clearer if it had used *bethulah*. Thus, the New Revised Standard Version translates *alma* as “young woman,” as does the translation of the Jewish Publication Society. The Catholic scholars who produced the New American Bible also preferred this translation, but they were forced by American bishops to use the traditional “virgin.”¹² We also know from such sources as Justin Martyr and Origen that the translation of this verse was controversial even in ancient times.¹³ The earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, translated the *alma* as *parthenos* (virgin) but some thought a better translation would be *neanis* (young woman).

As with the “prophecies” of Psalm 72 and 22, looking at the context calls the supposed prophecy further into question. The verses surrounding Isaiah 7:14 make clear that the child that the *alma* was to bear was offered as a sign to King Ahaz, to let him know that within a few years two enemy kingdoms would be destroyed. This can only be applied to Jesus through straining or cheap technicality (“the kingdoms were destroyed 700 years before Jesus was born”). It is interesting to note that Norman Geisler’s discussion of Isaiah 7:14 displays an openness to the possibility that it is merely “typological” but not “predictive,” which I think means that Matthew cannot be charged with making a mistake for using it, but it isn’t evidence of anything.¹⁴

Geisler’s Top Three

Norman Geisler is not willing to give up on all prophecy-based apologetics, however. In his *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, he give three prophecies that he thinks can resist the charge of being too vague: Daniel 9:24-26, Micah 5:2, and Isaiah 53.¹⁵

Micah 5:2 has already been shown to be doubly problematic: it is doubtful whether Jesus was really born in Bethlehem, and the Bethlehem prophecy is part of a description not fully matched by Jesus.

Isaiah 53 describes an unnamed person who goes through great suffering in a way that Lee Strobel insists has “clarity and specificity” and is “haunting.”¹⁶ What’s going on here is probably best understood

in terms of what has been called the “Barnum effect” or “Forer effect.” The latter name comes from a psychologist who performed a landmark experiment in 1948. He had the students in his introductory psychology class take a psychological evaluation. Rather than give them results based on their answers, he gave the students identical 13-point assessments, mostly based on a newsstand astrology book. Without knowing that they had all gotten the same evaluation, the students were asked to rate the accuracy of the results. The vast majority of the students gave the assessment a rating of 4 or 5 on a scale of 0 to 5.¹⁷

There are probably a number of reasons for this result, but a major one is the human tendency to read too much specificity into vague statements. When I read Isaiah 53, I see little more than some vague poetry about undergoing a lot of suffering. Keep in mind that Jesus did not exactly spend his entire life suffering; Matthew 11:19 indicates he was once doing well enough to be accused of gluttony and drunkenness. Was Jesus “despised and rejected” (Isaiah 53:3)? Maybe on the day of his death, but the Sunday before the Bible says he had a large crowd cheering on his entry into Jerusalem.

Attempts to apply specific lines of Isaiah 53 to Jesus collapse under even the slightest scrutiny. For example, Josh McDowell takes Isaiah 53:7 as predicting Jesus’ silence in Matthew 27:12.¹⁸ However, this simply ignores Matthew 27:11, where Jesus does speak. Similarly, he claims Isaiah 53:9’s mention of “the rich” as prophesying burial by Joseph of Arimathea.¹⁹ What, though, does he make of the statement that his grave would be with the wicked? The only way I can see this part being fulfilled is if one accepts the theory that the tomb was found empty because Jesus’ body had been moved to a criminal’s graveyard.

That’s two of Geisler’s supposedly specific prophecies out of the way. What about Daniel 9:24-26? Geisler claims that this can be used to calculate the year of Jesus’ death. When the subject of calculating years comes up, I cannot help but notice that people have been trying to use the Bible to set the year of the apocalypse since nearly the beginning of Christianity. When calculations are done without really knowing when the event will happen, they always come out wrong. The most

famous recent example of this is Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which predicted apocalypse in 1988, but this is hardly the only example.

Furthermore, other interpretations of Daniel 9:24-26 have been given. The *Oxford Bible Commentary* suggests that the passage refers to the death of Onias II in II Maccabees 4.²⁰ This would be no feat of prophecy if Biblical scholars are right to suspect that Daniel was not really written during the Babylonian Captivity, but rather during the Maccabean period. One clue is that Daniel ends with an instruction to hide the book away until the time of the end. This suggests that the book was "discovered" long after it was supposedly written, much in the manner of the Shroud of Turin or the Book of the Mormon.²¹

Finally, just like all the other prophecies I've dealt with, things have been ignored to make it work. Daniel 9:26 indicates that at the same time the person in question dies, "the troops of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary." No city was destroyed at the time of Jesus' death, so even if the calculation of the year were indisputable, the claim that Jesus fulfilled the prophecy would be rather strained.

Chapter 10

The World of Apologetics



his book would not quite be complete without going beyond individual arguments and looking at broader questions regarding the practice and significance of apologetics.

How Important is Apologetics?

Let's get some context: apologetics books sell well, better than most non-evangelicals probably realize, but no work dealt with here has sold as well as megachurch pastor Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*, which has sold over 20 million copies. Among other things, Warren exhorts his readers to "decide that regardless of culture, tradition, *reason*, or emotion, you choose the Bible as your final authority [emphasis added]."⁷¹ This would suggest that theological rationalism is not going to take over the evangelical community any time soon.

But book sales do not tell the whole story. A few books is all it takes to equip a pastor to do a sermon series on conquering doubt, to equip a youth pastor to deal with any doubters placed under his care, to equip a traveling speaker to get a room full of evangelical college students roaring with laughter at the idea that anyone could reject the amazing evidence for Christianity. At least based on my own anecdotal experience, such things are fairly common, and they result in apologetics

reaching a wider audience than book sales might suggest.

Also, the claims of apologists permeate other parts of the evangelical literature. The *Left Behind* books, for example, take for granted that we can trust Biblical prophecies about the future because they have been so successful in the past. Early in the series, the authors have a rabbinical scholar announce that he has carefully analyzed the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah and found 109 specific prophecies that collectively could apply only to Jesus and the odds of Jesus fulfilling even 20 of them by chance is an astronomical $1 \text{ in } 1.125 \times 10^{15}$.² Even if the argument were completely sound, there would still be an unintentional element of farce: the rabbi's claim is presented as a brand-new, earth-shattering discovery, but is in fact no more than a cut and paste of a stock apologetic claim.

On top of these points are the results of an interesting survey done by Michael Shermer and Frank Sulloway on why people believe in God.³ When asked why they thought other people believed in God, people mostly said that the idea was comforting and consoling (26.3%) and that that's how they were raised (22.4%). But when people were asked why they themselves believed in God, the number one answer was the design of the universe, picked by 28.6% of respondents. This reason was only attributed to others by 6% of those who responded to the survey. Some of the answers cannot be so neatly classified as rational reason/non-rational reason, which is why I present the full results for readers to look at for themselves (see Figure 1). What seems clear is that 1) A strong majority of people attribute others' religious beliefs to non-rational reasons, and 2) At least a strong plurality see their own beliefs in a more rational light.

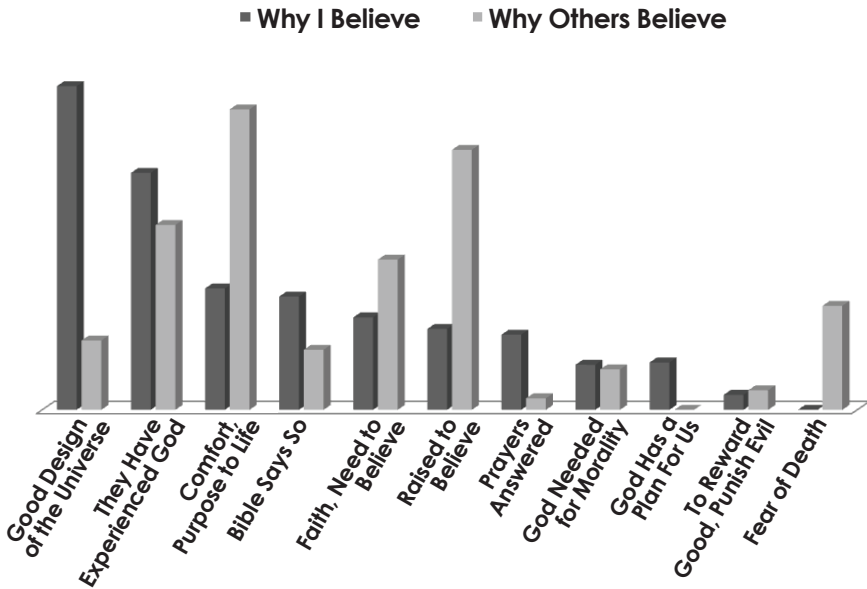


Figure 1. Reasons for believing in God. From *How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science* by Michael Shermer. (New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 2000) Used by permission of the author.

Shermer and Sulloway did not ask people for their reasons for following a specific religion. However, it would be unsurprising if similar results held in that area as well. This result would be significant, in that it shows that the average person's assumptions about religious belief in general do not match how individual believers view their own beliefs. If half or even a quarter of believers cited rational reasons for belief, it would mean a lot of people claiming rational reasons in spite of never having really read apologetic works. This would fit with my own first-hand observations that many evangelicals can vaguely cite apologetic claims even though it's clear that they're fuzzy on the details.

Apologetics and Conversions

In 1994 William Lane Craig debated John Dominic Crossan, a leading member of the Jesus Seminar. The debate was turned into a book, with

responses to the debate from two evangelicals and two members of the Jesus Seminar.⁴ One by Jesus Seminar member Robert J. Miller told of how back when he was a student at a Catholic college, he was quite enamored of arguments designed to show not only that Christianity was the one true religion, but also that the Catholic church was the one true church. His Catholic friends found them quite persuasive. Then he went on to graduate school and met people of other religious persuasions, who, to the young Miller's great surprise, did not find his arguments persuasive. From there Miller concludes that apologetics are almost never successful at winning converts, and that sophisticated apologists like Craig probably know this, even though they write as if they were trying to persuade outsiders.

In the response that he was allowed at the end of the book, Craig insisted that apologetics does indeed win converts, and cited as evidence the fact that he was once told that no fewer than six people became Christians after hearing one of his apologetics lectures. Such claims are by no means rare—since as Miller conceded, apologists do indeed write as if they were trying to convince outsiders. How well do these claims reflect reality?

Among Evangelicals who feel a great need to feel that their beliefs are based on evidence, there is an obvious temptation to exaggerate the role of apologetics in conversions, both in telling the stories of others and in telling the stories of themselves. In some of the stories I've heard things don't seem to quite add up and I am inclined to think the story has been polished up for evangelistic purposes. Still, the role of apologetics in winning converts should not be dismissed entirely. I do not think there is any question that new recruits can be more likely to doubt what they are being taught, and claims of overwhelming evidence in favor of Christianity can be quite helpful here. For example, I once met a student at the University of Wisconsin coming out of a Campus Crusade for Christ meeting who told me he had wanted to become a Christian after hearing testimonials about changed lives, but wasn't sure if he could believe the required things before getting some help from apologists. Such experiences do not seem uncommon. In the study

of reasons for believing cited above, Shermer and Sullo way found that it was people who weren't raised in religious environments who felt a greater need to justify their religious beliefs on rational grounds.⁵

Beyond this, I am willing to give some credit to claims like the one from William Lane Craig about getting six converts from one debate. Part of my reason comes from a story told by Carl Sagan in his book *The Demon Haunted World*. Sagan tells of how was once driven to a science conference by a man who happened to have the same name as a well-known TV personality. After learning that Sagan was a scientist (and not merely someone who shared a name with a well-known scientist), the man began pelting him with questions about extraterrestrials, channeling, crystals, Nostradamus, the Shroud of Turin, and so on. "Each time," Sagan says, "I had to disappoint him. 'The evidence is crummy,' I kept saying. 'There's a much simpler explanation.'" At the end of the story, Sagan makes an acute observation:

*Spurious accounts that snare the gullible are readily available. Skeptical treatments are much harder to find. Skepticism does not sell well. A bright and curious person who relies entirely on popular culture to be informed about something like Atlantis is hundreds or thousands of times more likely to come upon a fable treated uncritically than a sober and balanced assessment. Maybe Mr. "Buckley" should know to be more skeptical about what's dished out to him by popular culture. But apart from that, it's hard to see how it's his fault. He simply accepted what the most widely available and accessible sources of information claimed was true. For his naïveté, he was systematically misled and bamboozled.*⁶

There are plenty of reasons to think the position of the average target of apologetics is similar. One is that while there are decent popularizations of Biblical scholarship, they do not get as much press as sensationalistic, easily debunked nonsense such as *The Da Vinci Code*. Statistics abound telling us how ignorant Americans are when it comes to the Bible, saying, for example, that many of us think Isaiah is a book of the New Testament, or that Moses was one of the Twelve

Apostles.⁷ A surprisingly large number of us cannot even name the four gospels. When I began writing this chapter I had a vague notion that it was one in two of us that lacked this ability. Initial attempts to source this claim turned up confirmation, of sorts, but the survey was one administered in the 1950s.⁸ Then I stumbled upon an article by Boston University professor Stephen Prothero, summarizing the thesis of his book *Religious Literacy*, which indicated that things today are not as bad as they were fifty years ago—they're worse. Today, two out of three Americans don't know the names of the gospels.⁹ This makes them somewhat less than well-prepared to evaluate debates about who really wrote the books.

One last bit of evidence for this view of how apologetics works is a 2006 book by Josh McDowell, *The Da Vinci Code: A Quest for Answers*, written as a response to the movie version. It takes the form of a narrative surrounding three college students who are prompted to do some library research after seeing the movie, and, in the dramatic final scene, all accept Jesus as their personal lord and savior. The writing is uninspired, but the narrative is somewhat interesting in that they managed to get through their research without ever encountering the slightest indication that the Bible isn't 100% historical. For example, at one point a character says:

*Let's just say that if Sir Leigh Teabing were a real person—and a real historian—he would certainly know that it was the early Christians who protected and passed on those writings which were genuinely from the apostles and who also warned against other writings which deceptively sought authenticity under an earlier disciple's name—like *The Gospel of Thomas* or *The Gospel of Philip*.¹⁰*

Well, not quite. A real historian would know that it is very much in doubt whether any of the gospels are “genuinely from the apostles.” But McDowell's characters never learn that. There are hints that the story unfolds this way because one of the students is already an evangelical Christian who knows how to steer his friends to the right books. Apparently, McDowell thinks that that is how conversions are supposed

to happen.

Thus, when I hear an evangelist claim that apologetics works for making converts, I do not dismiss them outright. The truth is that average people with no special predisposition towards the claims of apologists may find their arguments convincing, simply because they do not have any contrary information. They, like Sagan's Mr. Buckley, are blameless.

Frauds

With their readers largely dependent upon them for accurate information, the question of the apologists' honesty takes on great importance. Some of the apologists' conversion narratives certainly give pause, especially Josh McDowell's claim that he only converted to Christianity after traveling to Europe to research the evidence for Christianity, a story McDowell has only been telling in his main books since 1999.¹¹ But given the way we naturally embellish memories of our pasts, surely that isn't remarkable, is it? That is, at least, how it appears when viewed in isolation. But as I read the apologetic literature, I've encountered too many claims for which "highly misleading" is the charitable interpretation. This includes Lee Strobel's claim of "meticulous" analysis by A. N. Sherwin-White showing the gospels cannot contain any legends. The Gospel of John is not the only gospel whose authorship is in question; A. N. Sherwin-White did not "meticulously examine" the rate of legendary development. They are such that, if made to support claims of ancient astronauts or the supernatural dangers of the Bermuda Triangle, many reasonable people would have no qualms about applying the word "fraud" to the writer in question. I ran across one example of Lee Strobel spouting an extraordinary outright falsehood in a newspaper interview: "there is plenty of evidence, over 500 eyewitness accounts, that Christ lived and died and rose from the dead."¹¹ It was obvious he had Paul's claim of 500 witnesses in mind, but I wondered if a former court reporter could really confuse a hearsay claim of 500 eyewitnesses with 500 eyewitness accounts—really confuse the two *by accident*.

Ultimately, I do not know what was going through his head on

that or any other occasion. I do know I am not the only one to have doubts about the honesty of some apologists. Timothy Grogan, one of the contributors to Ed Babinski's deconversion anthology *Leaving the Fold*, tells of how when he was a member of Campus Crusade for Christ, he once got quite excited about Josh McDowell coming to speak at his campus. However, "I had acquired a rather nasty habit in childhood of reading the bibliographies of the books prior to reading the text... When I looked at some of the quotations used by Mr. McDowell in their original context it became apparent to me that he took a great deal of care in isolating quotations that supported his view of the Bible, many times *ignoring the overall viewpoint* of the authority whose material he was using."¹² Still, I don't know how intentional such things are.

However, there is another sense in which the enterprise of at least some apologists is fraudulent. I am thinking, above all others, of William Lane Craig. Among his publications is the book *Reasonable Faith*, written as an apologetics textbook. In the first chapter, he says:

*I think Martin Luther correctly distinguished between what he called the magisterial and ministerial use of reason. The magisterial use of reason occurs when reason stands over and above the gospel like a magistrate and judges it on the basis of argument and evidence. The ministerial use of reason occurs when reason submits to and serves the gospel. Only the ministerial use of reason can be allowed.*¹³

In other words, it's okay to go around insisting that the evidence supports Christianity, but actually following the evidence where it leads is a no-no. It should be made clear that Craig is not saying that it would take a lot of evidence to show that Christianity is false, he is saying that no evidence or argument, however strong, ever justifies rejecting Christianity: "Should a conflict arise between the witness of the Holy Spirit to the fundamental truth of the Christian faith and beliefs based on argument and evidence, then it is the former which must take precedence over the latter, not vice versa." No qualification to this statement, however slight, is ever given. Craig tries to rationalize his position based on his own subjective religious experience, but the

value of religious experience is not up for rational critique either. If it were, his position would collapse because numerous other groups have appealed to religious experience to justify their claims, from Taoists to Mormons to Wiccans. Thus, Craig claims that his experiences are “self-authenticating,” therefore, “Non-Christian religious experience, even if it furnished [...] a ‘good reason’ to think my experience is non-veridical, does not furnish an overriding reason to think my experience is non-veridical.”¹⁴ So even if all evidence showed that Christianity is false and furthermore that religious experience is not to be placed over evidence, Craig insists it is the duty of Christians to keep on believing.

Craig is not alone in his views on reason. When asked to contribute to a book called *Five Views on Apologetics*, he expounded on them at length.¹⁵ Two of the other four contributors gave an explicit endorsement of that section of Craig’s essay, making his the majority view. One of the writers who endorsed Craig was none other than Gary Habermas (the other was named John Frame).

I must admit that Craig’s views are not universally accepted. In the *Five Views* book, Paul Feinberg gave a quite explicit dissent. In my communication with Craig Blomberg, Blomberg also explicitly disavowed Craig’s views. These dissents, however, do not negate the fact that the rejection of open inquiry is a serious matter in modern apologetics. Craig and Habermas are easily among the most influential apologists today, outshining the dissenters I mention. Both have launched vitriolic attacks on their opponents for alleged closed-mindedness. Never do they produce evidence of bias against their opponents as damning as the evidence they produce against themselves. They are, in short, some of the grossest hypocrites I know of. Insofar as they imply that they are not closed minded, that they will follow the facts where they lead, they are also guilty of deceiving their readers.

Probably most of their readers are not aware of their views. *Reasonable Faith* is written as an apologetics text book; it is not designed to be given to skeptics the way some apologetic works are. Once when I told a friend about Craig’s views on reason, his response was, “I thought William Lane Craig was a philosopher, this is run of the mill raving

lunatic fundie!” “Yes,” I replied, “run of the mill raving lunatic fundie who can come up with sophisticated arguments and knows to keep quiet about certain things.”

Most of the problems with apologetic arguments documented in this book are no reason for anger. They are instances of naïveté which could be gently corrected. However, in the case of William Lane Craig and Gary Habermas, the top two defenders of the resurrection, the problem is not naïveté. The problem is a conscious decision to reach a conclusion which they will not abandon for any rational reason, following a decision to sell themselves as objective scholars. When they do this, they deserve to be regarded as frauds.

Apologetics, Evangelicalism, and Eternal Damnation

When I look at the situation described above, I cannot help but think, “Why go to all that trouble? Why all the straining?” The question is not why apologetics exists at all, but why the dubious claims, the hypocritical *ad hominem*s. So much of it is distinctly overboard—why?

One part of the reason was already brushed upon in a previous chapter—where at one of his talks, someone asked Ravi Zacharias how God can justifiably condemn people simply for not believing, and Zacharias responded that they are suppressing evidence. The idea that unbelievers must burn was not challenged, because it is the accepted doctrine in evangelical Christian circles. If you take the apologists in this book, and look through the doctrinal statements of their organizations, you will find statements of this belief again and again. As a rule, they believe that it is not just atheists but all non-Christians who are damned; as one colorful critic put it, it is “a faith that says Anne Frank and Jack Benny and Dr. Seuss will be lit up eternally like Fourth of July Roman candles.”¹⁶

Amusingly, this belief insists on manifesting itself even when apologists attempt to conceal it. Take, for example, a response Michael Licona wrote to the DVD *The God Who Wasn't There*.¹⁷ In an interview

in the DVD, Robert M. Price said the following:

The hidden assumption is they say that we might be dealing with a God who is an ornery theology professor and one day when you die and go up there, you're called to the office of the professor, and he says, 'Well, I got your test back for you and I'm afraid you got an F. You're going to hell because your opinions were incorrect.' And that's what they think God is. You don't have the right answers? You're damned. And so they don't dare think for themselves, because they might make mistakes. . . . That seems to me an obviously silly and childish view of God."

Licona agreed that this is a "silly childish" theology, but immediately said that Price was distorting the Christian view. Then he asks, rhetorically, "what about those who want evidence but just do not think it is there?" and gives reasons why such people are indeed to blame for their unbelief. Such a response makes no sense unless Licona actually agrees with Price's account of Christianity.

Since Licona already conceded that Price's judgment of this theology is correct, it looks as if Licona thinks his own religion is "silly and childish." On a more serious note, it appears that Licona's work is largely driven by a need to rationalize his belief that everyone who disagrees with him on certain points is going to hell, and it shows through even though Licona claims to believe otherwise.

The examples of Zacharias and Licona should be enough to give wider context to the rabid denunciations that permeate apologetics. There are more examples, though. Let's return again to the *Left Behind* books: early in the series, the Antichrist promotes the "theory" that the worldwide disappearance of evangelical Christians was an "atmospheric phenomenon."¹⁸ The explanation is portrayed as obviously absurd, and there is a vague sense that anyone willing to swallow it probably deserves eternal torment. I suspected when I read it that this is how the book's authors view the theory of evolution, and indeed later in the series Satan is revealed to be the original evolutionist. Again, in the final book in the series one character thinks with disgust about those who waited to the very end to become believers: "Where had they been when all the judgments had come down? All the miracles? No sane person could

deny that for the past seven years, God and Satan had waged war.”¹⁹ Apparently LaHaye, the author of *Left Behind*, thinks such a situation is plausible, and given his clear dabbling in apologetics, he probably thinks something like it exists in our pre-rapture world.

There is another side to this coin, however. A number of ex-evangelicals, among them John W. Loftus (whom I mentioned in chapter Five), have reported being afraid to pursue their doubts at first.²⁰ Why? Because they had been taught that changing their minds would lead not just to punishment, but eternal punishment.

The influence of this view on apologetics can be seen in books written by Gary Habermas and William Lane Craig specifically on the subject of doubt (as distinguished from straightforward apologetics). Both to some degree concede that doubt is a common problem, and Habermas in particular takes a sympathetic attitude towards doubting believers, but both agree that if doubt threatens to lead to a change of mind, it must be stopped at all costs.²¹ Craig even suggests that Christian professors who expose their students to non-Christian viewpoints without explaining how to refute them are acting as agents of Satan!²² Open inquiry is a no-no. Though such a view is troubling, it makes a twisted kind of sense in the context of a belief that changing your mind means going to hell.

And that is not even the worst of it. There is a Christian apologetics website called Christian CADRE (which I mentioned briefly in Chapter 7) whose main writer, who goes only by the initials BK, once wrote an article on dealing with doubt that offered the following advice: first, realize that the vast majority of doubts are dishonest doubts. Second, if you are struggling with doubts, stop listening to other viewpoints and read some apologetic works.²³ When I saw the article, I put up a quick link to the article from my own site under the heading, “Ah, hypocrisy.” The ensuing exchange involved, among other things, my asking what he would think if skeptics advocated the type of behavior he was advocating, to which he replied that he’d be okay with it, as long as they were willing to admit that when people use their intellect to reject Christianity, it is “used more for rationalizing than actually thinking through the issues.” At the time, I didn’t bother responding

further, though several months later I sent him the following e-mail:

Dear BK,
I've been thinking about you the past couple of days, and have a nagging question: would you be willing to concede that your work in apologetics has been more a matter of rationalizing than actually thinking through the issues?
Sincerely,
Chris Hallquist
uncrediblehallq.blogspot.com

His response:

Chris,
I learned a long time ago that a person should only concede something when the facts are such that you are conceding something that's true. Since I have never been presented with a solid reason to believe that Christianity isn't true and that I am engaging in rationalizing, I must respectfully decline your invitation.
Of course, if you want to concede that your arguments against Christianity have been more of a matter of rationalizing away the fact that there is a God and such a fact has consequences than actually thinking through the issues, I would welcome that concession.
BK

To which I replied:

Dear BK,
Thanks for the response.
Sincerely,
Chris Hallquist
uncrediblehallq.blogspot.com

His position is clearly an uncomfortable one, but it is virtually required by the tenets of his evangelical Christianity. He must avoid the conclusion that many people go honestly to hell or dishonestly to

heaven, but at the same time must advise his fellow Christians against anything which puts them at risk of damnation.

This is an important point, because it is so tempting to ask, “What harm is done by people believing that those who disagree with them go to hell? Sure the idea of Anne Frank being punished forever is shocking, but it’s an imaginary event, so what is the harm?” But so many evangelicals, no matter how they came to belief in the first place, end up in a campaign of self-deception that comes from a mortal terror of changing one’s mind. That is the harm.

Avoiding Bunk

One last question is worth dealing with in closing: how, in general, do we avoid falling victim to bunk? A number of attempts have been made to lay out general principles: Michael Shermer’s list of “25 ways thinking goes wrong,” Robert Park’s warning signs of voodoo science, Carl Sagan’s baloney detection kit (which is available to curious readers online at the anti-Scientology website Xenu.net).

There is no substitute, however, for actually getting some practice at critical thinking—not believing everything you hear, learning to dig deeper when controversial claims are made, checking facts, and checking sources to see if anyone stops making sense on close examination.

So, in that spirit, let this be your practice case. Open up to the notes in back, pick a source or two that looks worthwhile, and read. Read the apologists I’ve been criticizing. I’ve tried to address every worthwhile argument but maybe I’ve missed something. In my experience, the books you’ll most likely be able to find at a local library are Lee Strobel’s *The Case for Christ* and Gary Habermas’ debate with Anthony Flew, published under the title *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* If this book is so lucky as to attract negative online reviews, read them, and read responses to them. Perhaps look for relevant sources not specifically mentioned here. Look for fresh angles. Dig deep rather than think a superficial examination will give you a sure answer. And above all, think for yourself.

Go.

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